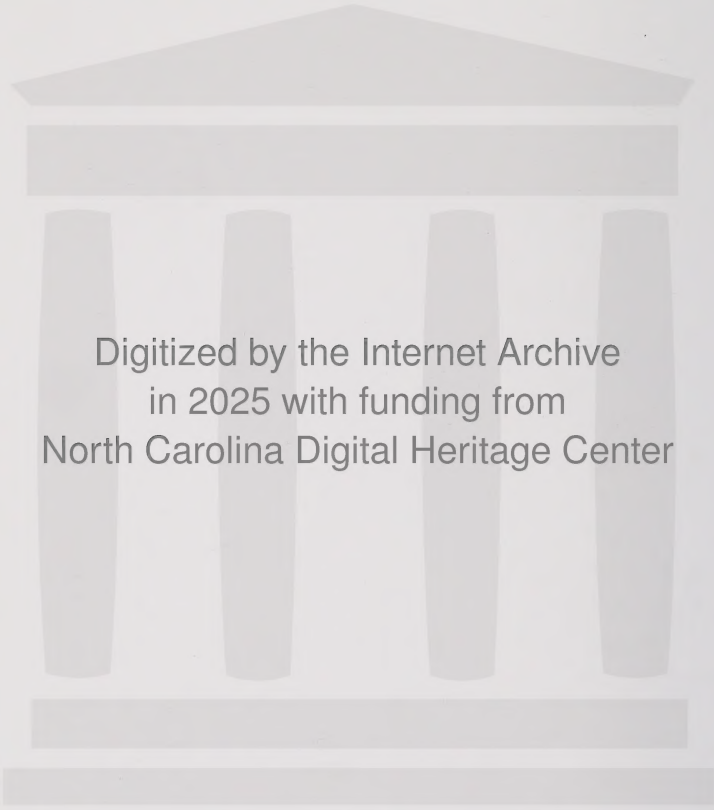
THE RHAPSODIST

Literature and Arts Journal

2016

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College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The Rhapsodist

Spring 2016

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
Asheville, NC

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Editor's Note:

"Literature is the most agreeable way of ignoring life."

-Fernando Pessoa

Dear Reader,

As A-B Tech's primary venue for literature and fine art, *The Rhapsodist* showcases the best examples of creative expression from our college's diverse population. We are excited to share a journal filled with "agreeable way[s] of ignoring life"—both written and visual.

Thank you for your continued support of *The Rhapsodist*. Enjoy...

Pessoa, Fernando. *The Book of Disquiet*. Trans. Richard Zenith. New York: Penguin Classics, 2002. Print.

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rhapsodist, n.

Pronunciation: Brit. /'rapsədəst/ , U.S. /'ræpsədəst/
Etymology: < rhapsody n. + -ist suffix. Compare French rhapsodiste ...

1. A collector of miscellaneous literary pieces. Now hist. and rare.

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A-B Tech's Student Services Department

"rhapsodist." *The Oxford English Dictionary.* 3rd ed. *OED Online.* Oxford University Press, 2011. Web. 8 March 2012.

A Common Dream
by ella mowad

My teeth fell out on a Saturday night,
And I watched them tumble down, and scatter.
I watched them in my sleep, before the light,
Thinking it was no concerning matter.
I would look for them, soon, when I woke up.
They'd be easy to find, white on the floor,
Like broken shards from a china teacup.
I'd fit them back, a puzzle, a pale chore.
There was no fear, no dread, no blared heartbeat.
It was so ordinary, so routine.
Horror yawned and was quiet, almost sweet,
And in bed I slept, mouth hollow, gums clean,
Let the world fall from my lips without mourning,
And dreamed my silent scream until morning.

Singer
by joanna maldonado

There's Something
by eric overbey

There's something terminal about a meadow
torn and drilled for mineral veins,
the oil derrick piercing the dense skin,
the tanker swallowing the precious liquid,
the valve tightly closed,
the dehydrated cavities begging for help.

There's something spectacular about an earthquake
that cracks certainty,
the seizures of unstoppable nearness engulfing the present,
the brick walls crumbling, the lamps shattering,
the soil liquefied into brown blood.

There's something beautiful about a tornado
that swirls like a blissful child in the backyard,
the twister lifting and tossing the dinner table,
the winds checking off their to do list of shingles and windows,
the grey eraser indifferent to the names of
someone's brother and sister.

There's something peaceful about a tsunami
that proceeds through rooted generations,
dragging along a kaleidoscope of buildings and cars,
the ocean filling the open mouths
that stand on roofs screaming for Mom and God,
the water solemnly rising, the voices gargling their way to death.

There's something justified about a sunset
that decays the hands of the watchmaker,
the burning orange a cage
that within he attaches a face to his timepiece.
He prods the earth, a rodeo bull.

Biology of the Earth
by ethan risinger

Earth has specific...collisions
These making big things,
The three states,
Not so far, not so close,
And that makes for so much
Concern, the skin and our bodies all coming with the tilts.

With tilts come the cells of the plant, the fontanelles,
Remember the tilt, but remember, hmmm, member,
that's not the fun of science,
the giggles are home
when the tv sinks.

Mary will observe "Wow"
Now confirming
We are talking
We are doing things.

The people of the Himalayas
Are used to the weather
Used to carrying
Big gloves of animal monster
Imagine what goes in the monster
What's in that snack?
What is that cookie?
Well we
We are, our bodies are
A big monster, a storage monster called:
Glucogan,
Fueled on meatfat
Or something else like
What makes the plant ink?

What powers the cat?
Petroleum? The capacity?
And how???
There are two types:
Climbing up the slide
And
Falling down.

Mind the tilt.

Water is our final accepting body.
It happens in the mattress,
CO2 to O2,
Mind the tilt but
Remember the tilt but
Really remember
The duration of your carbon,
The cyanide is not going to happen, still tho

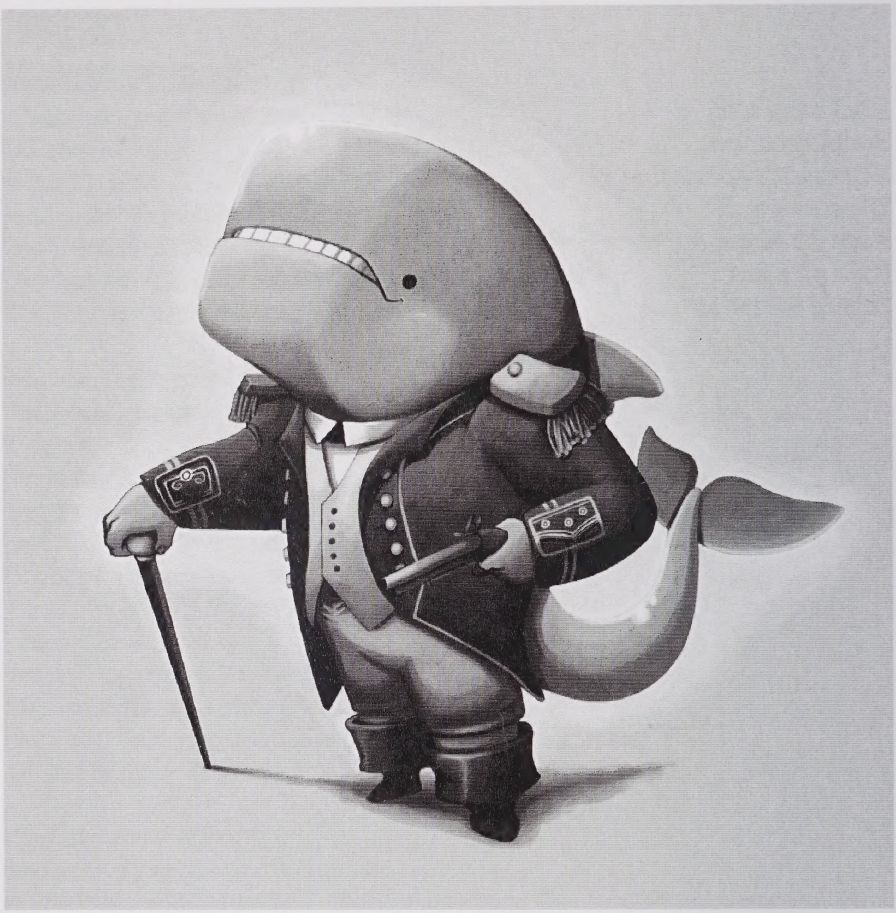
Why the heart goes higher?
You keep, it's doing the hop,
It hurts.
Some think
"Maybe if I do that,
I get there and have a heart attack."
The elephant for example.

I forgot the elephant,
Before they were something similar,
they were Mamets with 3, with us I think,
hairy and bald, dancing naked with a common ancestor
as the children story.

It is blue and the fourth
And something about a kid or two
with rocks making matter
How the matter was supposed to be?
Ask the matter,
but it'll just reply something nonchalant like:
"what's the matter."

Untitled
by abby cantrell

Blackberry soda
Sunburned lips
A heat wave across the city
The sun sets
Stars fall across the water
For a moment
Silence fills the air



Whale Captain
by andrea koupal

Chocolate Milk

(book excerpt from This, That and the Third)

by abigail hickman

Death introduced itself early in my childhood, and we have held a reciprocated interest in each other ever since. When I attended Lohr Elementary School in Canton, Ohio, an older boy, a fifth grader, died during recess. Our teachers were unprepared for this death, here, in the middle of a primary school playground. Death was not something they were taught to teach. There was some sort of whisper through the school that caught hold of our classroom like a vapor. My twin sister, who was in a different class across hall, said her class was talking about it that afternoon as well. But my classroom's windows overlooked the playground where the little boy had died, and we were drawn to the scene, not fully understanding what we were witnessing.

Our classroom was on the ground floor, putting us level with the action. Our teacher stood among us, staring out at a cluster of adults gathered around a small boy. The room was hushed and even as young children we knew we were watching something that was not meant to be seen. Just before the ambulance arrived, our teacher collected herself and quickly closed the blinds. We were ushered to our seats and told to put our heads down onto our desks. I can't recall if we started another lesson or if we were still sitting with our heads down when our classroom door opened noisily. We all glanced back to see who was coming in. It was our lunch lady, in a pink smock rolling in trays of milk on a school cart that normally held the filmstrip projectors. The row captains were told to collect and distribute the milk cartons to each child in the row. All the milk cartons were white with red lettering but for one solitary carton. It was brown with white writing, which meant it was chocolate. I wanted it.

My row captain collected five white cartons and passed them out to each of our eager hands. But I kept an eye on that chocolate milk and saw the lunch lady hand it to a particular captain, whispering something in her ear. I opened my own milk, excited that we got such an unexpected treat in the middle of the school day. I had almost forgotten about the playground and all the adults scurrying around on the other side of our closed windows. The captain with the chocolate milk walked to her row and handed a milk to each child. She had two cartons left, one chocolate and one white; she handed the chocolate milk to Ricky Montgomery. He put the milk on his desk but did not open it. Other kids in the class must have been watching that coveted chocolate milk as well because one of them whispered, "Hey! That's Ricky's brother." Our classmate was gesturing towards the darkened blinds. "That's Ricky's brother out there on the playground." I whipped my head back to stare at Ricky. I was thinking of a way I could get his attention to trade my milk for his when Ms. Billie, our pretty blond-haired teacher, walked down the row housing Ricky, helped him get up and escorted him to the lunch lady, who walked him out of our classroom. He left his milk sitting on his desk.

It was commonly known around our community that Ricky's brother was an ill child born with a faulty heart and his early death had been dreaded, but anticipated by his family long before it arrived. Ricky was out of school for a few days, and when he returned, none of us talked to him about it. We just acted as if it had never occurred. But we never forgot. Through the rest of my years at the elementary school, many of the kids, including myself, made a big show of walking around the spot where Ricky's older brother had collapsed, and then died. Nobody was brave enough to step on it.

From the moment we all crowded up against that wall of windows, my fascination with death was aroused. Up to this point, Ricky's older brother was the first and only body I had ever seen that wasn't old, dressed up and displayed in a funeral home. I can remember with perfect clarity how his body lay on the black pavement. He fell down near the handball court just a few feet away from the tether ball post. I didn't see any blood, just Ricky's brother crumpled up on the playground with adults running toward him. In my mind, these events are cemented solidly, and each detail from the time we were shooed away from the window to Ricky Montgomery's exit from our classroom, remains an acute memory.

After Ricky left, there was a let-down in the room. The slow-motion events that occurred in those twenty minutes were full of intrigue and urgency. I was intensely aware of each detail: I had a snag on one of my cotton knee socks; one of the Elmer's glue bottles in the window had tipped over forming a tiny puddle of white that had dried to the orange tip. Mark Brown was wearing a brown shirt, which I found funny at the beginning of the day. These details imprinted on my mind eternally. Everything dragged on slowly and impossibly fast all at once. This acute sentience felt like a pang of a particular type of pleasure that later became intoxicating. We had watched death through a window and the subsequent distancing and silencing around this event pushed our experience into forbidden and secret. I wanted to shout away the whispers and shine some light of understanding into the dark, forbidden place.

After Ricky left, the row captains passed the trash can back for us to discard our cartons. Ricky's captain pushed his unopened milk into the trash can without a thought. Something special had happened to us, but we could tell from Ms. Billie's demeanor that we were not meant to discuss it. It was a bad thing, I learned, to covet the chocolate milk of a boy whose brother had died under our watchful eyes. And it was very much a worse thing, to open conversation or ask questions about what we had shared that day. Our class was connected by this events. Strangely, Ricky, on the fault line of the aftershocks, was excluded from our experience. I learned that those who are in the center of a death storm become ostracized by the lucky ones who merely watch the effects of the howling wind from the safety of shelter. We were fascinated by it, yes, but we also distanced ourselves from Ricky. The observers always have an advantage over the observed. There was a certain quiet power here, and I wanted more of it.

al dente
by gloria good

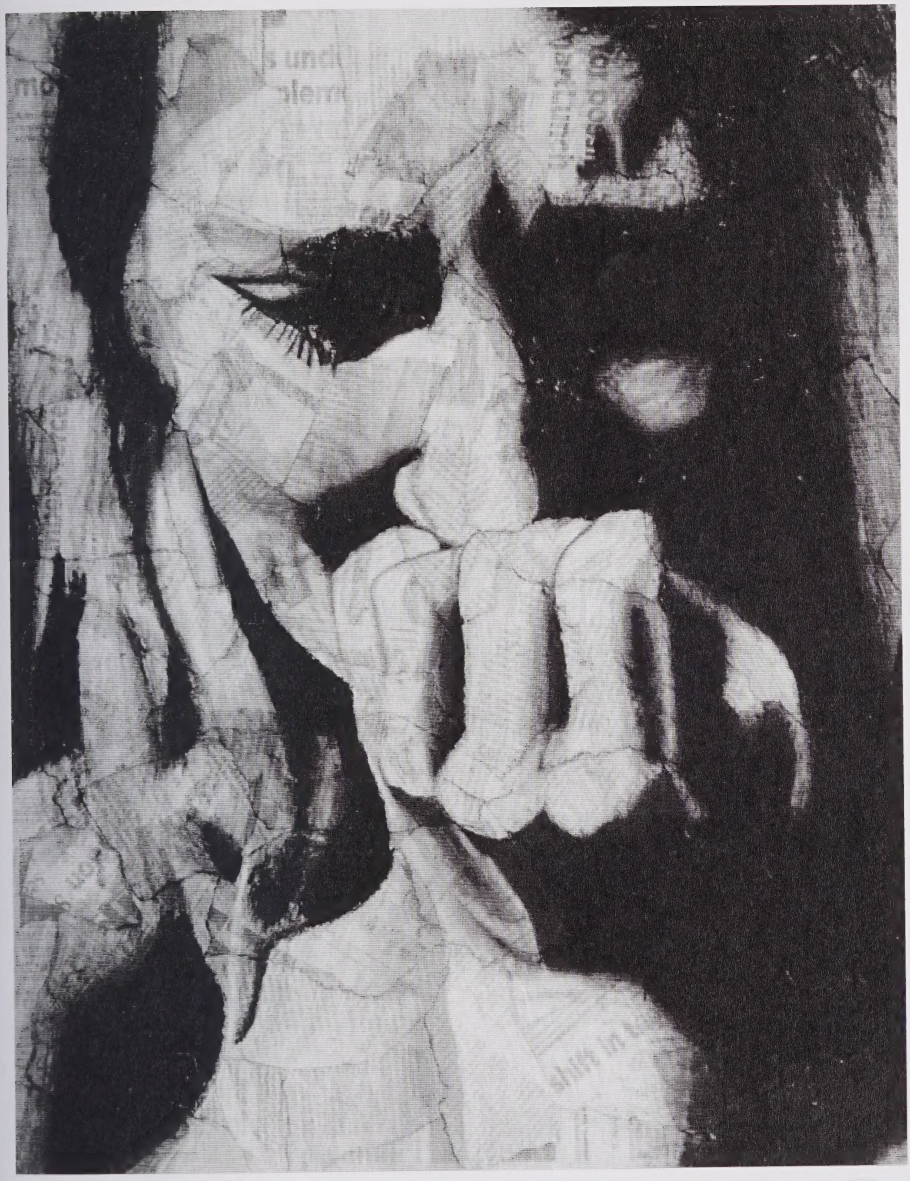
at first it's like pulling
your own teeth
with needle-nose pliers
and you are not a mechanic

we are not meant to hurt
ourselves but sometimes we must
take the stork-shaped tool
and with its fine-grained teeth

grip our own (sleek, rounded
boulders) and grapple

Sky-Spit
by jordan e. willett

There was a little orange raincoat
That tried to cover a girl
But the girl was vast in mind and heart
And the universe slept between them.
So she spit out the world on the sleeve of the coat
And sat down to watch the show.



Angst
by abriel forrest

Writer's Block
by beverly williamson

I just can't write about it.

Of course I want to write about the Polaroids of us upside down on the couch
with our faces painted, mustaches, and eyes on our chins and bandanas on our heads
so that in the picture we look like funny painted eggs.
That was Mama's idea. To be funny and upside down.
And we were the only ones who would do it, but everybody laughed.
I couldn't believe she used her eyebrow pencil.

If I wrote about my big idea to take her to the zoo I'd have to lie
and write: we walked and walked and looked and looked and enjoyed.
Because I don't want to write that she kept sitting down to smoke
and then said she wanted to leave.
She couldn't walk and look and enjoy because she kept fumbling for a lighter and wheezing.
Of course I was mad as hell.

I'd like to detail the times she did the Charleston on the hard wood floor
and we watched like people watch a circus – delighted and a little nervous about the wildness.
I'd like to explain how she could swim without getting her tall hair wet
and how she gave her shoes to her older sister who married a man who wouldn't work.

I started writing something in the hospital room, but I don't know where I put it.
I think it was about making tomato sandwiches or about how she saved me.

But I really can't write about it.

February Moon
by zach walters

the bent frames of rusted cars in the driveway tonight
are dreaming of an icicle moon
the dog dreams of a dead squirrel in the snow,
the girl dreams she meets herself as an old woman
sitting in the shadows cast on the wall from the fireplace
I dream that I'm out walking and I fall into a frozen lake.

the water rushes
so blue and cold
I thrash my legs
as it swallows me whole.

sometimes I can go on worrying
that I might get worried
if I keep on worrying like this:
this is not the dream I wish to have.
Linda, in support group on sunday says
"what if I just go crazy and attack my husband with a hammer?"
gee, that stuff seems to catch on like wildfire
the parking lot is slick with black ice.

I return home to my bedroom
surrounded by space heaters churning late into the night.
a picture on the fridge from fourth grade
shows me fighting goblins with a battle-axe
this classic archetype of good versus evil
makes people step off chairs with belts
trying to win their own civil wars
that's not the dream I wish to have
I'm not scared of winter, I say
looking upward at the moon
my dog runs towards the porchlight
with something caught between his teeth

Higgs Bosom
by hayley ingram

Here the trees speak when you
whisper back.
Sapphire compasses beat and breathe salty dreams
that hide among nascent sea shells of quartz.
I am shipwrecked
blinking stale carbon.
Moving with the momentum of some
foreign moon and rubiate sun.
Life is constant baptism
sweeping dusty relics, now so murderously awake.
The moon sighed,
"I'd rather be blind than deaf,"
while I watched the world shimmer
in the Shaki sway behind my eyes
and suddenly I knew
what it was like--
to hear and be here.
Sometimes being awake is an arduous ocean
one that breaks on the epoch
of my finite future.
The clock wears a black bow tie
waving his fingers like a pendulum swinging,
ticking with the snores of an old tree
branching through the space
of an old, tired universe.
All of these colliding galaxies gather as grain.
WE are stars waiting to explode
before God or ourselves
Dying Daily
swimming through lakes of cerulean phosphene
drunk and full
brimming with e x I s t e n c e.
minuscule compared to the infinite.
I must keep reminding myself
that I am always returning.
With a taste of perish,
but full of magic
shitting spectre spirits of ourselves.
Never forget that we are only organisms.
Shaping bones. Growing fingernails.
Circulating blood beasts.
WE are Gods that have neglected
to recall all of those lifetimes
spent asking
why.

Baby I'm Gonna Leave You

by matthew sauve

As I walked into the dank tavern on Hillside Street, I was struck by the familiar fumes of Puffgrain Cigars, the same bitter-smelling cigars I remember my grandfather smoking when I was a kid. I looked around the dimly-lit room. A grainy vinyl rendition of the Beatles' "Helter Skelter" played. Smoke poured from up near the bar area as I made my way towards it. As I strolled up, I saw the culprit. Sitting on a high chair, dressed in nothing but a diaper and a patched leather vest, was a bald-headed six-month-old baby. His arms were covered in tattoos of naked women, skeletons, and fuzzy dice. His vest had different pieces of patch flare on it. One read "4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO." Another said the words "Ride or Die" with a stitched-on picture of a Harley. The infant looked like he had just gotten off of a twelve-hour shift as a long-haul truck driver, a job he's probably been working since conception. He looked up at me, noticing that I was staring.

"The fuck you lookin' at?" the baby grunted at me in a low, bass-driven grumble.

"Nothing," I mumbled back. The baby had an intimidating presence. "I just... noticed that you're smoking the same kind of cigars my grandpa used to smoke."

"Yeah? Big fuckin' deal. I bet your grandpa is a prick."

"He was, kind of... but he's dead now," I made one of those half-smiles I do when I'm uncomfortable. "Lung cancer. He actually died last week. I just came from his funeral." I'm not sure why I was so drawn to this baby. There was something comforting about his presence, something familiar.

"Ah, shit," the baby's shoulders slumped. He seemed to empathize with me. He had obviously lost millions of family members in the Great Ovarian Swim, and probably felt some survivor's guilt. "I'm sorry, kid. Why don't you pull up a stool and have a drink? Hey, Frank!" to the bartender, "You old Polack kielbasa son of a bitch, get this kid a double on me." Judging from the baby's general demeanor, it didn't surprise me to hear him shouting racial slurs at the old man.

I walked up to the bar to get my free whiskey. I'm not a huge fan of bourbon, especially the kind of cheap bourbon you're bound to find in a hole-in-the-wall like this, but considering the circumstances, I wasn't about to turn down a free drink.

The bartender grabbed some ice from the ice machine with his bare hand, a hand that looked like it had just changed the oil in his old pickup truck. Some might think that's gross. I didn't care. Plus, I thought, if I get sick, I can take a few more days off work to grieve. The white-bearded bartender slid the drink across the sticky wood bar. No eye contact, of course. Not in this place. I gave him a nod and walked back to my stool next to the baby.
"So, your granddaddy died, huh? Guess that explains the faggy little suit."

"Yeah," I said nonchalantly, sipping my drink. The ice made the Early Times whiskey seem a little better. The baby's verbal assaults didn't land anywhere near me. I was used to abuse. My grandfather raised me after my parents died when I was six, due to complications from getting murdered.

My grandpa was a drunk. The town drunk, I think. He would've loved this cheap whiskey at this dive tavern. Most nights, he would go to places just like this, leaving me at home with little-to-no food. Sometimes he'd take me with him, and I would beg the bartenders for French fries. When he didn't take me with him to the bars, I would usually hear him stumble in at four in the morning and pass out on the living room floor. On the rare occasion he was sober, he and I would order takeout and watch one of our three TV channels. Occasionally he would wake up and grunt at football highlights. Sometimes when the black weather girl on Channel 3 came on, he would say something vaguely racist or sexually inappropriate and nudge me to agree with him.

"So, what's a nice kid like you doing in a shitty bar like this?" said the infant. "Are you even old enough to drink?"

"Are you?" I laughed. "What are you, like six months old?"

"Seven," he replied, deadpan.

"Oh, okay… well, what do you do?"

"Whatta ya mean?"

"What do you do for a living?" I clarified.

"Oh. I'm retired military," the baby grunted. "Infantry. Twenty years. Desert Storm. Afghanistan. You name it, I was there."

"Kuwait?" I asked.

"Fuck no, what do I look like, some sorta pussy?" he laughed hard and coughed one of those deep, mucus-filled coughs that only smokers and coal miners can do. I could tell he'd been smoking since he was at least negative forty.

"If I might ask… what is a retired baby doing in a bar? Aren't your parents worried about you?" The baby looked at me, perturbed.

"Parents!?" He exclaimed, slamming his drink down on the table, cracking his plastic sippy cup. I could tell I had struck a nerve. "My parents died fifteen years ago. They was murdered." A tear dropped down his smooth, soft, squishy cheeks. "Murdered."

"Me too!" I replied, much too excitedly to be talking about my parents' murder. "I mean…" finding a more appropriate, solemn tone, "me too."

"Oh yeah? What happened?" the baby inquired, wiping the tear from his adorable little face.

"My grandpa told me they got stabbed to death in an alleyway… but I don't know if he was ever talking sense, you know? He was always making up bullshit and just, drunk all the time." I hiccupped and nearly vomited. I could feel the whiskey starting to take effect.

"Yeah, grandpas do that I guess," The baby stuck his hand deep down into his diaper and scratched. "I don't remember my parents. I was too young. But from what my grandchildren tell me, they got kilt in a horrible accident. They was swimming at a pool when they got attacked by sharks. But you know how kids got that imagination and all that." The baby left his hand in his diaper while making full eye contact with me.

"Yeah." I finished my whiskey. Two more doubles were already in front of me. I nodded and held one up in salutation. "Thanks, baby."

"Let's get hammered!" the baby hiccupped and spit up on himself. We drank and carried on for hours.

I said, "When I was six, I remember my parents taking me on this

rollercoaster that somebody had died on the week before. I always wondered… are they bad parents?"

The baby, "When I was about twenty years old, I got beat up by the cops for peeing on the side of an abandoned building. I was just walkin' home ya know? Fuck the po-po, I mean shit." We laughed.

There were hardly any pauses between our ramblings. Whenever there was a five-second break where no words were spoken, we shot down another double Early Times. I must have pissed at least eight times. The baby didn't go into the bathroom at all. I wondered how full his diaper must have been.

I began to see double, and even triple at certain points. Three tattooed babies sat across from me, all spinning around each other, spilling liquor all over the table. I said to the baby, "I'm gerna get another round. This barshender isn't even pain attent… hiccup… shun to us." Belch.

I got up and walked towards the bar, stumbling over the stack of high chairs in front of me. I leaned on the bar, "Hey, Frank, you old Jew fuckface… me an' the baby wannanother draaaaaank."

The bartender looked me in the eye for the first time that night. "You need to call a cab, buddy. You've had enough."

"Whaaaaaaaaaaat?" I said in a high-pitched falsetto that must be like nails on a chalkboard to a bartender. "I'm fine. Gimme another round, Frank before I call the Gestapo on your ass." What the hell was I saying? I had never said anything racist or anti-Semitic in my life.

"Get out," Frank said, pointing toward the front door.

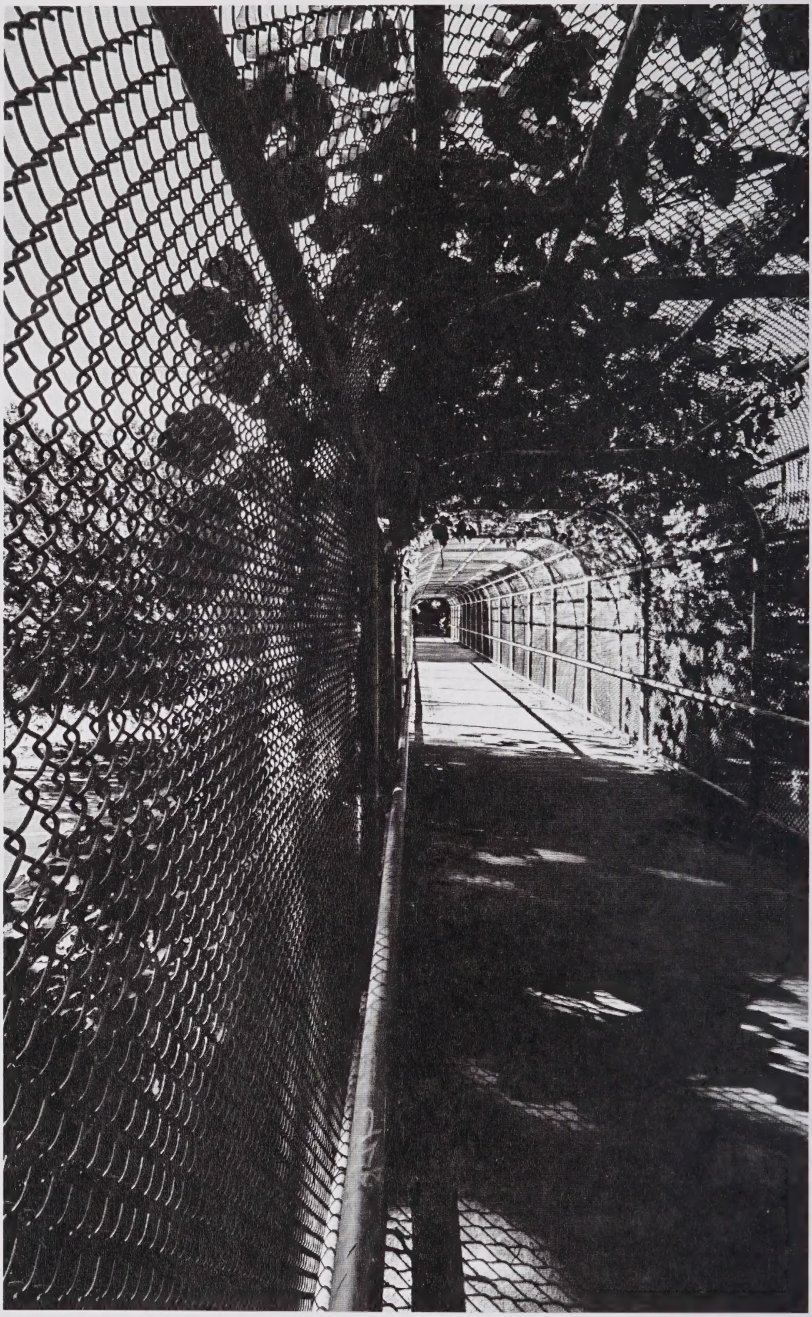
"Well lemme ask ya one more thing," I slurred, wobbling on the barstool in front of me. "If I leave… whoooo… is gonna take care uh the baby?"

Frank picked up the phone behind the bar. He gave instructions to a cabbie to come and pick me up. "BAH!" I barked at him, gesturing him off with my arms.

I looked behind me, to my shared space with the baby. He was gone. Where the… "BABYYYY! I'm gonna. You left meeee!" I screamed at the empty high chair next to the jukebox. A man, inserting coins into the jukebox looked at me, smiling and nodding, like he thought he knew what I wanted.

Led Zeppelin's "Babe, I'm Gonna Leave You" blared out of the jukebox as I stumbled toward the bathroom, in search of the baby. I kicked the door open. "Baby!?" I kicked in the stall door. A man in a trucker hat looked back at me from his seat on the toilet, startled. "Sorry," I said. I left the door to the stall open and asked him "Have you seen a little baby, about yay high?" I motioned, with my hand parallel to the ground, at knee height. He stood up, pants around his ankles, looking like he was about to punch me. "Fuck you!" I screamed at him, as I hurried out the door.

I staggered through the bar, running into patrons, and leaving chairs knocked over in my wake. I stumbled out the front door and fell to the ground, befuddled. The ground spun in both directions at once. There were three of every light in the street. I vomited, and fell down into it. The baby was gone.



Pedestrian Bridge
by gloria good

Inaudible Expression

by hanna l.

"Nothing,"
thought September 24th, worth being said aloud.
Maybe like that proverb I heard
about the beauty of silence
not being easily matched.
Maybe emptiness.
Maybe the most powerful sayings are spoken best
on plain, white paper.
Unaligned. Untouched.
The most intimate words
unsaid. The softest, sweetest expressions
unspoken.

A godforsaken art form of love not like Hollywood sunny flashes
of put on pieces, but the stuff that burns
and burns and burns
down the houses into infinite embers.
Bits of fire blowing sparks into tall, yellow wheat fields
Burning an uncontrollable fire ablaze the world.

Jupiter kindles Saturn's rings.
Orion flickers a burning inferno.
The spherical globes of flames turning the universe
into blazing beings of silent love.
Hung within the galaxies, burning in our souls.
Ignited inside those immeasurable seconds of silence
as your hand finds its resting place.

Sure Was
by eric overbey

We approach the rolled carpet from opposite sides,
raising the ten year collection of soda and cat piss above our heads,
it's organs caving into a grin and bleeding hazy streaks.
We drop it, a splat of clumpy goo,
my brother Allen moaning,
It's in my eye, it's in my eye.

I hear the television playing my favorite show inside
and watch carpet bile drip from my fingertips.

Before Allen brought his grumbling,
I was alone in the front yard,
the carpet a weighty thing kicking my shins.
I watched the Willis family across the street,
together raking
their leaves onto the blue tarp, dropping the rakes,
dragging the tarp, lifting and dumping into the fire,
autumn ash rising,
then floating,
then gone.

Allen circles the carpet, arms crossed,
a police officer surveying a dead body,
frayed tan veins flopping in the cold breeze.
Why didn't you call me yesterday? he says,
shaking his head.
I didn't think it would rain, I say.
He shoves his hand into the carpet,
shoveling an impossible amount
of soupy white innards out,
the smell of aged milk stunning.
But, now we have this.

We domino topple the column from one end,
over and over,
thumping and thumping.
Tripping, continuing down the driveway,
a muddy creek in our wake.

We stand, hands on hips,
It's supposed to fit in there? he says.
I motion towards the yard and say,
there's nowhere else to put it.

Together lifting,
him screaming, we throw it in the trash can.
It swirls around the plastic and sinks to the bottom,
unraveling and filling the can with its scarred circle,
but still peeking over the lip, eyeing us.
Allen flips it off with both hands,
like he really means it.

We sit on the porch,
passing a cigarette between us.
I say, Hell of a storm last night.
Holding his back and rubbing his eye,
he says, *Sure was.*

Madness
by jordan e. willett

I met madness in a dream
He told me I was easy to find
He gave me a dead-corn smile
That he knew would hang in my mind

We threw back our heads to drink kerosene rain
And thought up better words for fun
Then he snatched my serotonin and asked for my name
I told him to give me one

So he called me "Capricious Thing"
And kissed the top of my head
And the cool spot that he left there
Painted each new word I said

Heavy Headedness
by abriel forrest

Biography of My Father in Spring
by grey wolfe lajoie

Slowly, painfully, the epiphany arrives. Though sometimes it comes only once we've dramatized reality, adapted it to fiction. It's just like walking in the dark night, and then, gradually, sensing the outline of a figure in front of you who isn't really there.

There I am: very tiny in the tub, asking Dad what this says. He takes the shampoo bottle from my pale nude hands and pretends to read the label.

"The liturgy of your heart, will balk softly if you read this." He says that. Something like that. What good is that? I may as well learn to read.

In the garden, he smokes and tells me that when he dies, he'll return as a robin. I spend the rest of my life watching every robin very carefully, imagining how it must feel to be so swollen, to come suddenly to such a delicate black beak, to see the world through driblet eyes, and to have a face that's stained sanguine.

At night, I sit in the dark with him. I watch the light of his cigarette, this red blossom doing figure-eights in the air. All the time he sits in the dark, his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands. His voice is immense, thickened by time. He tells me about his uncle Gabriel, who shot himself in the face one summer. Dad tells me he and his father were the ones to clean up the mess.

"Everything that my papa was," he explains, "is inside of me. And everything that I am, is inside of you." He describes picking up pieces of skull, the red staining his fingers. I picture this all in black and white, so long ago, except for the blood, which is bright in my mind.

Often, my mom told me, "Take everything your father says with a grain of salt." I was too young then to know when he was lying. My father had no uncle. But what I need you to understand is that it didn't matter. He wasn't lying; there really was some mess he and his dad tried to clean up, and it really had coagulated, become impossible to wipe away.

To get a good sense of my father, maybe I should tell you what other people thought of him. The man, they said, was a drunken carpenter, a hyper-intellectual sociopath, an abuser, with animals tattooed across his chest.

You should also know, he was my first hero.

If I look back through my child's eye, I recall my father as chaos. But looking closer, I see too an immense stillness, a brooding shadow like a raincloud. He scared most people away with his vicious wit, or his aggressive, barrel-chested nonverbal communications.

But you should also know, he was my dad – a soft old man, a painter who liked to watch the trees, liked to whisper to ducks at the lake. He would sometimes take me out into my mom's garden, when I was young, and tell me that everything breathes, even the tiniest stuff. Or else he would go out in the yard by himself, and sit for hours in silence, stroking the petals of a flower with the back of his hand. He would sit out there until my bedtime. I can still see, with wide eyes, through the foggy glass, the little orange glow of his cigarette, flitting through the dark.

My father was a caveman, the last of his kind to be found. Or this is what my mother tells me. When I was small, I spent the weekends with him. He liked to offend people; in gas stations, in restaurants, at the movies, the lady behind the counter might say, "Oh! is this your grandson?" She'd ask because he looked so old – he must have been sixty by then – and because she was just following the script. He'd reply, "No, this is my son."

"Oh my!" she'd say, and smile pleasantly at me. "How many children do you have?"

"Well," he'd begin, "counting the abortions..."

Everything in the world, to him, was sex. He was obsessed with it. The meaning of life, I had gathered, was only procreation. Since as early as I can recall, and for many hours each day, he explained the world to me through his philosophical patina of sex, using mostly words I didn't know.

"Grey Wolfe," he announced, and I would have to listen. "The womb," he said, "is the great utopia of Earth. Anything else – just an ontological leap into a metaphysical plunge." He lowered his thick eyeglasses and stared down at me. "Son," he said, "I have been trying to get back into that womb since I left." Really, Dad was just severely heterosexual. He idealized women, their feminine qualities and virtues. And he hated men. All of them.

Friends of mine – other young boys – were enamored with his gaudy slashes of vulgarity. But to me, it was just the droning of my parental figure. I listened, and I tried not to be bored, and I tried not to be boring, and he smoked his cigarette, waiting for me to grow up.

Originally, epiphany was a religious term. It referred to the physical appearance of a deity. The first epiphany occurred as three Magi came to Bethlehem and witnessed God's light in the body of Christ. In English, the term 'Magi' is often translated as Wise Men, but more literally, it means magicians.

I don't know a lot about this stuff, but my dad did. In his twenties, he went to seminary school. Later, after he'd run away from his first marriage, he became a belligerent atheist.

Like I said, I rarely think about religion. I never write about it. When I'm reading and it comes up, my mind wanders. But I think it is one of the things I need to talk about, if I'm going to bring my dad back to life.

I remember once a Jehovah's Witness named Stan came to our door, and my father invited him in. I was thirteen, and my dad and I had only just smoked a bowl together for the first time. Stan was a spindly gray man, sweating in the summer heat and staring at my father through pale, wide eyes. My father gave him a cup of coffee, and they sat down together in the poorly-lit living room.

"Thank you sir," Stan said. "I'm calling on you and your neighbors with a very interesting article about The One Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand who are to be saved." I was baffled by my father's kindness toward this man, but quickly enough his intent became clear. He lit a cigarette and leaned into it, contemplative and serene.

"Ah," Dad said, "but in John, chapter fourteen, verse twenty-three, it states that all who believe in Jesus will enter heaven." Soon enough, I'd lost track of the conversation, and could tell what was happening only by watching Stan's face, which stiffened in quiet worry each time my father spoke. "And I'm curious," my father said, "how could Adam comprehend the consequences of his disobedience, if he didn't yet know what disobedience was?" Each time my father inhaled, it was cigarette smoke, the bulb of fire burning bright, illuminating his entire face for just one moment.

He prepared to disassemble, cross-referencing memorized passages, pointing to philosophical plot-holes in the holy book. "And how is it," he asked, "that God could say, 'Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore get wisdom' in Proverbs 4:7? Yet in 1 Corinthians 1:19, he says 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. For it is written…"

Stan left without saying another word. And I gazed at my father with awe.

The first real story I had about him, the one I told my friends in grade school, was about the night my mom finally divorced him. I was seven. My mom had already legally left him, taken me and the custody papers and moved us into a new home. But not long after, we returned to our old house, under the cover of midnight, where Dad was still squatting. My mom – the nurturing homemaker – had come to dig up her Japanese Maples and load them into a pickup truck. It was a covert undertaking that required a convoy of aunts and uncles. I was a child, but I tell you, those trees were enormous, gasping in the dark that night. I watched my mother using a pike-pole to dig deep trenches around each tree and lift them into the truck. She heaved the dirt up into the night sky: clumped shadows singing through the air. When my father appeared in the doorway, silhouetted by the light inside, she did not look up. And when he stepped forward, fully nude, and let out a long scream, my mom's digging continued with steady rhythm. My dad held something: a framed antique needlepoint, depicting two robins resting on a branch. He lifted this high over his head, then hurled it toward the ground, where its splinters and shards unfurled into the garden. My father looked down at me, shouting.

"You are never going to see me again," he said. When I told this story to my friends, I left this part out. Instead, I illustrated my black aunt Brenda, brandishing a taser at my dad. I tried to explain what the snap of a taser sounds like, heard for the first time by a child. I did not let them know how I watched those broken slits of wood and glass, falling into my mother's garden bed. Or the way my father beat, with words, his booming chest, and made my mother cry. I collapse this stuff with humor; I have to or it hurts.

We sit together in my mother's garden. I'm fifteen, but the sun crests in the sky, and the wind tickles the trees. Is this where we are, or only where I want to put us? In the sun, the milk-white thistle of his hair turns golden. I'm happy to have him here, sober. He's explaining what it is to have an artist's eye, to watch the trees yawning, the daisies flattered. He has no shirt on, exposing his leathery torso, which is draped in dull green tattoos. I don't know what he's talking about, but something in his demeanor calms me. He's telling me about bumble bees.

"When you were younger, you know, I kept a bowl of fruit out for the bees."

"I remember," I say. "Apple slices with sugar. In the dining room." I recall my older brothers killing all the bees one day, when Dad wasn't home.

Dad watches a carpenter bee. He wants it to land on his hand.

"Could you fix me a drink?" he says. I look into his eyes, which are warped by the layers of glass. This is what happens each Saturday, when Mom's at work. I will go inside, take the liquor from my mom's cabinet, and pour him a drink because he's asked me to. Then, slowly, he will become harder and harder to love.

"No," I say. He looks at me. He pinches the hinge of his eyeglasses between his fingers, then lowers the lenses, enough so that his pupils are just over the rim, and he glares at me. I keep looking him in the eyes. I know this trick by now; he wants to intimidate me. But really, he just can't see without his glasses. Really, it's the only way he knows how to look into my eyes.

"What did you say to me?"

"No," I say. This time, when I say the word, he shouts a laugh: a sharp German noise swaying, suddenly, out from his scaled French nose.

"If you ever," he says, "say that to me again, this will be the last time you see me."

Sometimes I play this game, where if I stare at my parents long enough, they appear as strangers. Just like if you say your name over and over until it becomes a blob. I play this game now, without meaning to, looking at my father. I examine the windswept wreckage of his face, the lint on his Christ-like beard, his intricately beat-up jaw, the meringue of tobacco on his fingers.

"No," I say again, and then he leaves.

Dad's favorite philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, believes that the epiphany – a manifestation of the divine – is seen only in another's face. "The face," Lévinas argues, "in its nudity and defenselessness, signifies: 'Do not kill me.' It is this transitive innocence that creates the epiphany. The face is meaning, all on its own. It leads you beyond."

The last epiphany I get to have, before my father dies, occurs when I'm sixteen. My mom and I enter Dad's apartment, find him splayed out on the kitchen floor, naked and writhing slowly. He is sixty-seven by now, has been smoking and drinking hard since he was twelve. The smell of gauze, the heat, the pinch of the hallway – I remember these things well. I look into my dad's eyes just once on this night. I don't make the mistake again. He is emaciated, his cheeks sunken, his eyes like a frightened animal's. It's like he's just been struck by a light for the first time, like some rawboned victim of a bombing. He gazes up at me as if I'm foreign. My mom is saying things to me, and I'm trying to listen. She wants us to pick him up, but suddenly I'm terrified by the thought of handling this fragile old man. When we lift him, he is so much heavier than I imagined. Quickly, we drop him sidelong into a recliner, and I watch him there for a moment, making sure not to see his eyes.

"Do you want anything, Steve?" my mom asks, preparing to make him a stiff drink.

"I just need water," he says.

We stare stupidly at him, not believing what he's said. "How long have you been laying there?" she asks, but she stomps to the nearest sink before he can reply.

My dad swallows the water, explains that he tripped over his table the night before and fell. He tried to crawl but couldn't, and eventually he gave up, just decided to lie there, dragging pieces of cardboard out from the recycling-bin toward his body, so that he had something soft and warm to lie on. At some point while lying there, he came to understand that no one would show up to help him.

My dad stops speaking, and looks toward my mom, who's cleaning the apartment to keep busy. "You know, none of the other women in my life do what you do." She keeps cleaning. "Beal," he says. "Beal." Really he's saying 'B.L.' which are her initials, but he's always called her that. Long ago, I thought it was her name. "Beal," he's saying, but she doesn't respond.

My dad begins to sing: this song by Patsy Cline. I remember him singing through my childhood. Singing or humming, in those happy moments that burst through the mundanity of each day. His raspy voice evaporates for a moment, is replaced by the low rumble I remember.

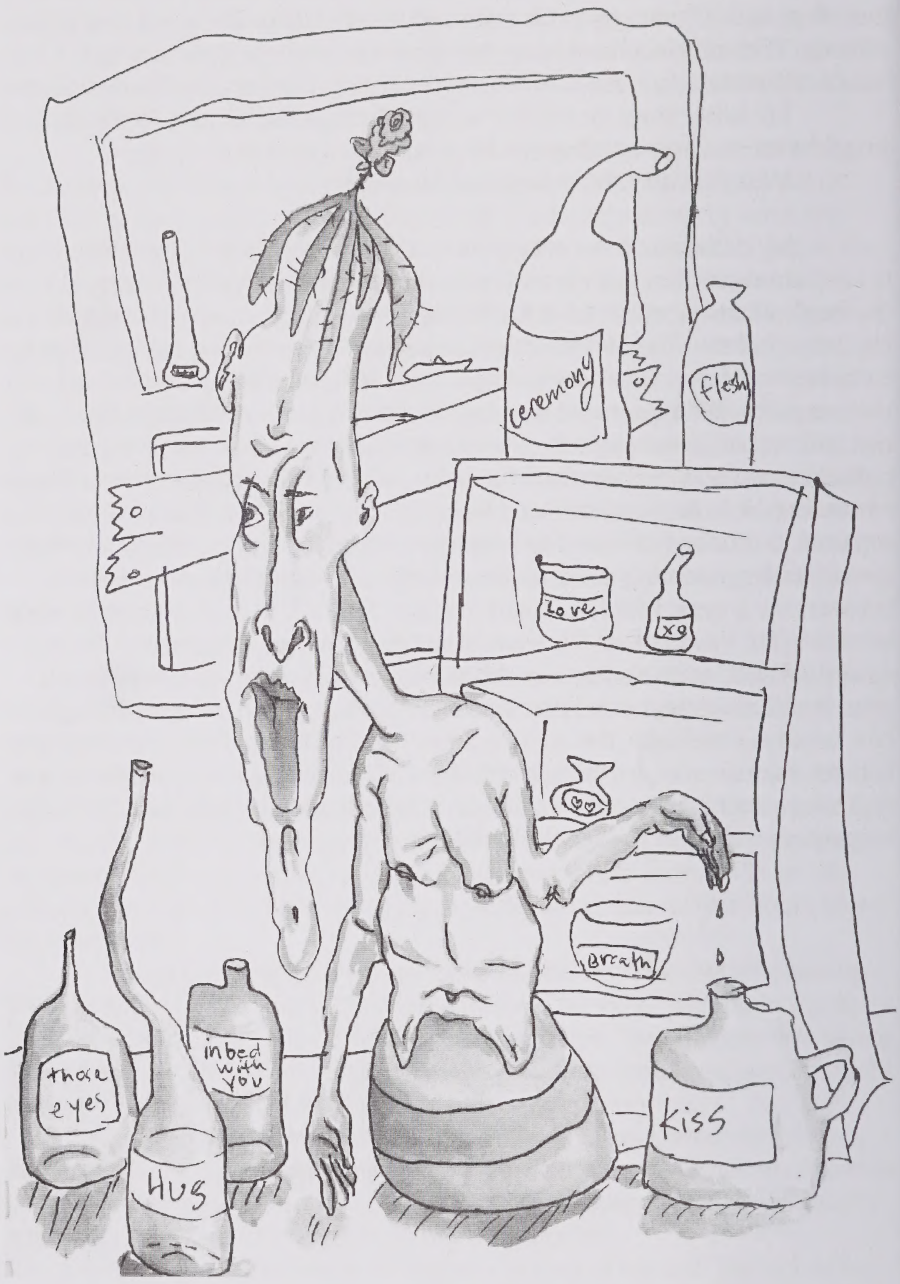
Singing, Dad stretches his legs out in front of himself, like a child on a highchair, so that I can see the coarse, pocked bottoms of his feet. I fix my eyes on the walls of his apartment, which are covered entirely in photos of my siblings: a small monument to his towering life. I wonder how my siblings might have handled this situation, if they could have been as strong as me.

They each live more than an hour away, and rarely visit. Each has seen him as I see him now only a handful of times. They're all much older than me, and they were raised by a man in his prime, so they're allowed to remember him as such. Their childhoods were spent with a man I'm trying not to forget. I handled this situation well not because I'm strong, but because I'm detached.

My father sings for my mother and he sings for himself. He doesn't sing for me. I am only an observer, always, of the spectacle.

"And I'm crazy, for loving you," he sings.

My dad died on the snowy third day of spring. I sat by the window to keep strangers from seeing me cry, and I started to notice the beauty in the fragile white dabs that fell softly through the sky, spring sunshine glowing through them. They fell in momentary glory before melting into the damp earth below. We spent the day sitting around him, listening to his strained, viscous gasps. We sat around him and we waited, as if in a moment he would rise, put on his glasses, light another smoke, and rant about carpentry or politics or sexuality. Finally, the nurses began removing tubes and tape. The whole time he looked as if he could wake up right then. I wanted to remain separate, but nobody let me. My hand was placed on his bare chest, over the eyes of his largest tattoo, a broad green dragon. I watched the green leaking between my fingers. I felt him breathe clearly, for the first time in days; he was breathing fire then, not air. We were all so happy to hear him breathe. No one moved, we just sat there, kept as still as we could, listening carefully to each calm breath. For maybe an hour we sat like that, in silence, only listening to him breathe. Gradually, the breaths slowed and hollowed. Soon, his breathing became so quiet, so thin, that we could not tell if his lungs were still working at all. But we kept listening. It was the most remarkable thing; he wasn't breathing anymore. It didn't matter. We kept listening.



slice of ham
by micala smith

Accuracy
by ethan risinger

there is a feeling about good accuracy
when you're throwing deck chairs into the road,
into the cheeks of trees,
and it makes you really smile,
like the time you curved into
the discus thrower,
and nailed your backyard pine
lodging your mother's patio side table
in the firmamental reach of the branches.

it's the knowledge
that the laws of physics can't touch you,
it's the wisdom
that you finally know
the exact location of every item
in the supermarket,
that the robbing of a bakery you negotiated,
the one with crumbly gun holsters
and aging rye hands of the baker
only left the blood-dough of one loaf on your hands,
and you can live with that,
because you know where it is,
glopping in the webbing of your fingers.

normally you worry why you think about
what the size of your clipboard
says about you,
but after you put stickers on it,
make it yours,
you don't ask that anymore,
you're almost totally Pentecostal about it
in theory, but not about big stuff,
it always moves tho
like a toddler leaf,
slowing but sidetracked by shifts

you remember when you were eight
there was too much bug spray
on the outside of the stained glass
and jesus looked

really good for the first time,
like a good worker
skin still afraid of the sun
and you gave yourself nicknames like
filet,
breast,
spit,
half,
drippy noggin,
nasty bito nugget,
to fit in because the other one
didn't fit right and now
you feel the accuracy.

you saw a child make two Power Rangers
fight Hell-In-A-Cell style
inside the cab of a pickup
and that really got to you didn't it?

and you,
tho fertile,
probed yourself inside the celibate bed
of the Dodge Ram 500 in the parking lot
without anyone noticing,
felt the bed, smelled the metal seats,
putting your nominate in between
the outdoors and the back window
to could look at the kids
without really doing anything but looking.

when you're home later,
falling back on the patio furniture in the trees,
the chagrin of your mother
when she tells you the eyes aren't much,
but it still looks good,
and that knowledge is knowing a tomato is a fruit,
wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad,
and that accuracy is in between
the throwing and the falling.

The Center-Seam
by jordan e. willett

I found myself sitting
On the center-seam
Of a church
Balancing on the thread
That strung the halves together.

Inside God's wooden ocean
The stitches run up me
Like a spine
Soul-splitting symmetry
That makes my fingers stutter
And demands divine.

A Journey Home
by josh sessoms

The temperature had dropped to well below freezing and the wind ferociously cut deep into my aching body. I had spent the day hiking up a valley after conducting an early morning raid on a terrorist outpost in Northern Afghanistan. With twilight long descended, I was at a resupply point fitfully resting and awaiting further orders. The team commander plopped down with a "mule eating briars" kind of grin, and said, "I guess they take the whole neither rain, nor sleet, nor snow crap seriously," as an envelope appeared in his hand. After opening the letter, my throat was choked with emotion, in my hands were bulletins from the church I grew up in as a small boy. For the briefest of moments, I remembered.

I spent my youth like most boys in a rural southern small town. I was of earnest faith and hard work stock, brought up to never cheat, steal or lie, and to never, under any circumstances, trust a democrat. My days were filled with mostly joy, pick-up ball games, commando raids on kids from the next neighborhood, and fantastical daydreams of adventure. By high school I had achieved all a pimpled faced kid could, hit a home run, awkwardly made it to second, or maybe it was third, base, and scored sufficiently well enough in school to be accepted to college. Life was good and life was an open book waiting for tales of adventure to be penned.

After graduating high school, I spent the entirety of one semester away at college. I had chosen to attend school as far away from home as student loans would allow, not because I felt the need to run away, but to run towards something bigger, something farther. With all the knowledge an eighteen year-old-boy with one semester of college brings to bear, I joined the army. With a hunger for anything other than home and reflecting the enormous learning I possessed, I quickly volunteered for the toughest schools the army could offer and deployment to the conflict in Kosovo. There I was baptized by fire and blood, dirt clods became bullets and pine cones became bombs. Despite not having yet mastered the art of peeing straight, when I left my chest was full of medals, I had scars from combat, and I had become "somebody" in the world of special operations. My confidence and esteem soared. Adventure became home, I would fight for small town U.S. of A but no longer belonged there.

By 2001, my military career had advanced at a record pace. I was a new husband with a first born son arriving soon. I was stationed in Alaska, happy and content amongst the majestic scenery teaching arctic combat. I called home often, but the thought of going back never interested me. Home was a place all too familiar, a place that held a few memories, some family, but nothing of any real importance. That life had been lived, my life was what was important now, my plans, my goals, my new home.

On an unremarkable morning, at a remarkably busy, for five a.m., base checkpoint I sat in my car blissfully ignorant of how September 11, 2001 would forever change my life. Escorted by military police from that checkpoint, I arrived at my headquarters in time to watch the second plane strike tower two of the World Trade Center. Not thirty minutes after the first plane struck the world trade center, I called to wake up my wife. I could think of only two things to say: "turn on the T.V." and "I love you"; the "I'll be late for dinner" would be understood.

After three years of near constant combat, I prepared myself for a short visit home, normal face in place, I reflected on my life since the terrorists attacked the United States. The time had brought me a daughter I had never met, a son who did not know me, and only the promise of more deployments. I returned to find my house empty and family gone, in their place divorce papers. The indescribable connection to normalcy that my family had become vanished, and the home created so far away from where I began, gone. Redeploying back overseas, war consumed me, I embraced combat as my new lover, and the theater of war became home. A numbness, thick, heavy, sticky, like mud, enveloped me. The dull pain of wounds, received and inflicted, the constant reminders of my existence, they comforted me. For three more years I stayed, never quit living, and never dying enough. Friedrich Nietzsche says, "Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you." The man I once was, the husband, the boy, were gone.

Sitting on that freezing hill in 2008, emotionally and mentally empty, I remembered. I thought of my childhood, playing soldier in the woods, laughing with friends, baseball games, the excitement of a high school crush, and innocence—the innocence of one who had not yet seen true horror, mostly of one who had not yet committed it. The thoughts flooded my consciousness, like the sun burning away Appalachian morning fog. Though I knew deep within that my pain and struggles would never leave me, I was certain that I had not become the monster; I could still turn from the abyss. Those bulletins sparked a fire that illuminated the part of me that could never be lost or marred, the foundation of all that was me. Though I had left home long ago, home was still alive within me. I remembered the path home.

Evolving
by tybie tallulah maitri

Three to Five Minutes
by ellen j. perry

Jolene

I was born in Maryville, Tennessee, in 1976 when that Dolly Parton song was popular, and I can't tell you how many times people have started busting out singing, "Jolene... Jolene... Jolene, Joleeeeeene!" whenever I tell them my name. So the first thing I thought about in the E-Z Stop Food Mart, the one with a Dairy Queen attached, was that if the pregnancy test said YES, I wouldn't name the kid after some damn country song.

"You all right in there?" a woman's gravelly voice called.

I realized I'd been in the bathroom for a while and there wasn't but the one stall. I flushed to make it seem like I'd been doing something other than clutching the off-brand First Response test kit directions, and I let the woman sidle in past me. She had on a dark red fanny pack stuffed with what looked like dollar bills and cigarettes, wrinkled tan shorts that were riding up, and a sticker on her outlet-mall flowery blouse that read, "I Luv Gatlinburg." Typical early summer in Tennessee. Tourists everywhere! It wouldn't be long before they descended on me at the Pancake Palace where I'd been a waitress for about five years, on and off.

"Woo, it's hot already, and it ain't even June yet!" the woman said. She flushed the toilet and then headed over to the sink.

"Sure is," I mumbled. My nerves were shot all to hell.

"I tell you what," the woman said, throwing a wadded paper towel in the trash, "I've done been through about six Band-Aids today over at Dollywood. All that walking like to killed my feet." She proceeded to take her white Reeboks off, and then her thick ankle socks; various shreds of what used to be Band-Aids dangled. Oh, Lord, I felt sick all of a sudden.

"Woo, that feels better," she said, propping herself up against the sink and fanning herself. "I told my husband, Willy, I said, 'Willy, you know my feet are going to give out today.' Good thing he thought to bring the stuff he uses to cover his face with when the dermatologist cuts off those skin cancers. You ever seen that? Somebody's skin after a thing has been cut off? Or, well, they might not cut 'em off, might freeze 'em. Like a wart. I can't remember what the doctor did to Willy last time. Well, it don't matter. You enjoy being young, honey! Gettin' old ain't no fun."

Desperate, I started fiddling with my phone like I was getting an important message. Maybe something from Dolly Parton herself, or the President of the United States.

"Anyhoo," the woman went on after recovering from a sudden coughing fit, "We're up here celebrating our 45th anniversary with our ten grandbabies. 45 years! I can't hardly phantom it."

Did she mean "fathom?" Did she say ten babies? It didn't seem to matter to her that I wasn't responding. I could have been anybody in that bathroom. She could talk and talk, just like those customers at the Pancake

Palace, talk and eat and cough and ask for more syrup till I thought I'd lose my mind.

"You married, honey?" she asked. "If you are, here's my advice: the only thing to do is learn to put up with each other. That's the secret. Just put up with each other. Then go to Dollywood or something every now and then to get a change of scenery."

When I was growing up Mama always told me, "Be nice, Jolene. Act polite even if you don't feel like it." I'd been nice for 39 years, almost as long as Mrs. Band-Aid and Willy had been married. How far had that gotten me? I smiled at customers, brought them extra napkins, poured more coffee, thanked them for coming to the Pancake Palace, did it all over again on the next shift. I was done being nice.

"Look, lady, I need to take the pregnancy test I was about to start when you came busting in here, and I need to be alone to do it."

Wide-eyed, Mrs. Band-Aid scooted out fast to wherever Willy was, and I locked myself in the stall. They'd surely shake their heads, horrified, and talk about how the young people today have got so disrespectful.

Ok. Stick pointed down. Done. "Wait three to five minutes," the directions said. It seemed like forever.

Jim

At the edge of me and Jolene's house not too far from Cade's Cove, the honeysuckle had just come out. Those white blooms smelled so sweet I stopped the mower the other day just to breathe them in. Reminded me of being a kid, I guess, when Dad would take my brother Al and me out to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and let us run around. We'd look for deer and see some every now and then. They'd show up like magic, look at us, then move slowly back into the woods, almost like they wanted me and Al to go with them. I wanted to real bad and sometimes still do. I never could kill a deer, even though Jo's daddy was all the time after me to hunt with him.

I sat in my Chevy Blazer, thinking "blazer" was about right on a hot day like this one. Couldn't decide whether to turn on the air. There was a bench in the shade outside the E-Z Stop, but I just kept waiting. Thought about Jo inside, taking that test. She was all to pieces after the visit with Grandma Kay and didn't want to wait till we got home. Three years ago we were happy when the test she took came back positive. Told everybody, got all excited. Then something happened a few weeks later and all of a sudden we weren't pregnant, and she cried for a while but didn't talk about it too much after that. The doctor said it just happens sometimes. I kept up with the family business building vacation cabins, and Jo decided to go back to school. The days went by and we did ok, but now I wondered what was taking her so long.

Jolene

I thought I wanted to be a social worker until I took that Religion and Cultures class as an elective. Our teacher told us about some of the snake-handling churches in Tennessee, and we read Salvation on Sand Mountain about a journalist in Alabama who wrote down what he saw in a "signs following" church. That's what they call the snake handling and strychnine drinking places: Church of God, or Jesus, or Christ the Lord, or something, with Signs Following. I was hooked. I read up on what it might cost for me to start the Anthropology program at UT-Knoxville so I could do like Dennis Covington and learn about religious fanatics, people like Jim's nutty grandmother Kayleen who went regular to the Holiness church. She had just told Jim and me when we went over there for lunch, glaring at us with those awful sharp blue eyes, "The Lord don't cotton to no living in sin." Jim just shrugged and ate the last bite of snap peas, but I got mad and stormed out of there and ended up in a bathroom stall at the E-Z Stop, watching for a single line or double line or some kind of sign following.

Once I got past thinking about the country song name problem, waiting for three to five minutes to go by, I had a clear-as-day revelation like somebody coming out of a strychnine haze: I didn't want a baby. I had wanted the other one, the one who died or never was really even alive, but I didn't want one now. I was almost 40 years old and restless, wanting to start something new. I could maybe have a real job, a career, something to do with my days that didn't involve trying like hell to shampoo that sweet Pancake Palace syrup smell out of my hair. Jim liked it, said it smelled like honeysuckle; he got all close and sniffed my hair like a dog, wrapped it in his hand. But it made me sick. I hated the Pancake Palace and wanted out. A baby would keep me there, I knew it for sure. Panic, oh God. One more minute.

Jim

He was a boy, this baby. I knew it for sure. I never did have a feeling about the other one, it seemed kind of like an alien or something not real. I put the windows down in the Blazer and started thinking about everything I wanted to do with my boy, stuff I needed to tell him. Turned on the radio and George Jones was talking right to me. Golden ring, with one tiny little stone. Well, no problem there, me and Jo could get married at any one of those little wedding chapels in Pigeon Forge. Shoot, we could do it tomorrow if she said ok.

I wanted my boy to know what it was like to run free in the woods, to see a mama deer and look her right in the eye, to smell that honeysuckle when it bloomed like Jo's hair, light from the summer sun, sweet and long as pulled taffy. I needed to show him how to use his hands to make things, hammer a nail, build a bird house then a tree house. We could fish and tell dumb jokes and aggravate Jo. I'd take him to church but not Grandma Kay's way; I would show him God was as much outside as inside, and we could see God everywhere in the cove. I couldn't wait to meet this boy, my own son.

Jolene

Staring at the stick, it took a while for the result to sink in. I didn't move until finally someone came in the bathroom and knocked, hard, on the stall door. I jumped and banged the toilet paper holder hinge loose, then dried my tears on my shirt, let the lady and her kid in, and splashed some water on my face. Jim was waiting for me in the car and I had to go out there, had to face him. Right then nobody knew but me. This was my secret for just another minute. What if I ran out the back way of the E-Z Stop, never to be heard from again? Crazy. But maybe I could make up a story, say I dropped the stick in the toilet by mistake, needed to wait a day or so and do it again. Then call my sister-in-law in the meantime, try to decide what to do about it. Come up with a plan.

Jim

I never could figure out why Jo was so upset that day, why she cried a lot for a month, except hormones I guess. All the guys told me that's what it was, hormones. She'll be ok, they said, just pregnant woman stuff. Jo finally agreed to marry me and Grandma Kay was happy, but it turns out I didn't feel any different after the paper was signed. Somehow I thought I would.

Our son Rylan is four years old now and we have a big time together. Jo loves him to death and takes good care of both of us. But every now and then when the honeysuckle blooms, she gets a tired look on her face and I know she wants to go lay down. Other day after work when I pulled up, Rylan hollered, "Bye, Mommy," running out the door like a wild animal ahead of me toward the field, the sun pouring down like hot gold so bright I about couldn't see him. I chased after him until he fell in the grass, laughing his head off, and then we saw something move. "Look, Daddy!" Rylan said, pointing. I grabbed my son up fast and stepped back, slow-like, keeping my eye on the timber rattler. The snake was coiled up, black and brown, the color of dirt and desert sand. It was late May but I felt cold all of a sudden.

Right at the boundary between my dad's land and the old trailer park, a shady-looking guy in a faded ball cap showed up in the tree line, seemed like out of nowhere, and loped toward us. "Don't kill it," he said, arms raised. "I don't have nothin' to kill it with," I told him, which was the truth even though I'd been trying to remember where my uncle might have left a shovel. Rylan whispered, "Who's that man, Daddy?" I told him it was just one of Grandma Kay's church people, most likely, and he said, "Oh." I held Rylan's hand tight and walked away but looked over my shoulder once; the man was gathering up the snake in a burlap sack, nudging it in with a stick, and I shivered. Rylan picked a few wildflowers for Jo and I've never been so glad to get home. "Suppertime," she said, putting Pancake Palace leftovers on the table, and I held her close, close, scared of something worse than that timber rattler that I couldn't even name.

Desperate Woman
by joanna maldonado

Poemas
by isabel perez

Y te escribiré más de una vez,
Una carta cada día por el resto de mi vida.
Cada noche cada día tú en mi alma te dormías.
Y te escribiré de mi memoria,
De la ausencia de tu sombra,
De la oscuridad que sin tus ojos le daban luz a mi mirar.
Y te escribiré de mi dolor,
De mi pobre corazón
Que siempre todo te entregó.
Y también del tiempo en vano
Y de los sueños que soñamos.
Y aunque el sol se ha fundido
Te escribiré desde mis sueños poemas,
mientras vida el sonador.

I will write you one more time,
A poem every day for the rest of my life.
Like every day and every night, you used to sleep in my heart.
I will write you from my bare memories
Of your shadow's absence,
And the darkness in my eyes without your light.
I will tell you of my suffering,
And my poor loving soul
That always gave you everything.
Of the time in vain
And the dreams that we dreamt.
And even though the sun has melted
I will write you poems from my dreams,
while the dreamer still breathes.

Pain and the Manning Brothers
by ethan risinger

The last time that the Colts won
I was slurping orange juice
with my family coughing out large wads
of conjecture about the Manning brothers.

My grandmother waxing,
leaning even into the shakes
in the earthquakeish washing she's doing
to the nachos,
tongue lovingly combing the topography
of her blue corn chip,
instead of just chomping,
like everyone else,
her fingers, voice, stretching
with a squiggle like a rope ladder.

My brother Tommy,
who really has no eyes worth talking about
is sitting across the room.
Shoulders down, spine like bent wire,
making, carving, sweating over a joke
about American liberalism in the form
of a two point conversion.

It's the first time in a long time
That I think:
"I don't want to get old"
that "I'm 22
with a now crescent moon shaped esophagus,
waiting impatiently to put library magazine titles
on magnet strips, and attach them to my car with Tommy's help
while he eats barley chips with queso on them."
This is what making time for family is.

Even Tommy, makes me wonder
which Manning sibling is better,
even he convinces me in toto
to collapse my ballerina knees
and twist into the shattered television outside
to play-act the end of the fourth quarter like a reporter
that got Peyton and Eli mixed up.

"Peyton takes the pigskin an- wait is Peyton the blonde one?
They're both blonde? What's his number? Shoot- uh, uh
The Colts are staying formidable this year!"

Then Tommy clears his throat,
the sound of a truck's air brake,
and says loud in a voice
of a commentator, like a brick,
being thrown against a brick wall:
"Oh Eli comes rearing past the 50!
The 40! The 30! The Unalienable Rights of the Individual!
The 20! The 10! The Red Zone! Touchdown!"
I don't laugh, because I don't get it, and because
I got hyped up too, and hit my head
on the ceiling of the laminate tv box,
most kinds of pain can kill laughter.

Tommy drops his arms
from their field goal position,
"Who names their kid Peyton?
Sounds like a horse girl name"
and its bad, but
I laugh very hard all at once,
and cut my palm on the toothed glass
of the televisions interior, but for some reason
I keep laughing.

In This Room
by e. ryann roth

visitors come to gaze
at her in her confinement
from behind plastic bed rails.
She, a spectre of her former self,
the lioness that
roamed the mountain roads in search of God and blueberries,
rummaged thrift store bag sales for forgotten treasures,
walked barefoot in the grass to clip a red dahlia for her hair.

She drank wine on the beach as the sun set,
she screamed at her children in anger
and, later,
hugged their necks too tight,
just so she could smell them and feel the fine texture of their hair against her cheek.

Laundry meandered lazily in mole hills along the floor
and socks went unsorted
because she'd rather play a board game,
take a road trip,
choreograph a family dance routine,
or
inhale a seasoned chicken sandwich with crisp waffle fries and extra pickles from the Chik-fil-A across town.

And now she is in this room
caged with greeting cards and children's drawings,
in this single bed,
in a bleary fog of morphine,
in too much pain to lie beside her husband in pleasure,
only permitted, through an open window, a kiss of wild wafting air
on her sweaty forehead
and the matted hair gone quickly gray.

I hold her fragile hand in mine,
silent fears trickling
down the stones of my cheeks
like mountain streams.

I tell her I love her
and that it's selfish of me
wanting her to stay
and I tell her

it's okay
to go.

But it's a lie.

stain
by micala smith

Correcting Things
by john-paul michael burgin

Other cars drive by. Each one is a thing of mechanical splendor propelling someone's self, someone's whole life from one point to another. It's all perfectly choreographed. One misstep or malfunction and the mundane drive between those points can be transformed into violence, suffering. Nietzsche says that life is suffering—with meaning. The road is zoned residential but it gets a fair amount of traffic. I like the sound of the cars. An older blue pickup truck sounds like its timing needs to be adjusted. A bright red hatchback is low on oil. I can tell because I hear its lifters knocking. The backdrop of nothingness here is no longer something natural; the air is filled with the roar of transportation and the strain we put our vehicles through to move from here to there and back.

I am reassembling the engine in my fifteen-year-old Jetta. All of the seals and gaskets have been replaced. I put in an after-market cylinder head gasket for better compression. It has all new high-performance plugs and wires. Everything is clean and I can understand where each piece of the engine fits, how it all works. I close the hood, turn the key, and listen to it idle. It reminds of me of an orchestra and I feel like a conductor. I feel in control. Everything is in order; the timing is precise.

People around here like to bring their cars to me when they're broken down. I tried a job in a real shop—once I started to figure out how all of the pieces of an engine function in tandem—but it didn't work out. It's a small town and Jerry's is the largest parts store, repair shop, and dealership, all-in-one. The owner finally let me go after a lady brought in a minivan for an oil change. He found me in the shop over an hour later. I was halfway through replacing the mass air flow sensor—a repair he said "the customer didn't ask for and wasn't going to pay for." I didn't bother to tell him that I had also cleaned her fuel injectors. Now I just work at my family's hotel. Every town needs one—a hotel—but that doesn't mean there are always enough people for it to stay busy. One does a lot of waiting in a place like that, and a lot of reading. You find a way to be patient. Rousseau says that patience is bitter but that its fruit is sweet. There's nothing around here to bring in tourists and a larger chain hotel close to I-35 takes most of the business that does come through. Sometimes people stop by on their way to Duluth or St. Paul—we charge a little less than the chain hotel—but most nights the rooms stay vacant. I work the front desk four nights a week and help keep things in order.

It's cold here most of the year and brutally so in the winter. Even during the coldest months, I'll bundle up and do any repair that anyone asks me to. Sartre says you can't rock the boat if you're too busy rowing. If someone pays for the parts, I never charge for labor. I've rebuilt engines in the snow; I've replaced a heater-core in below zero temperatures; I've done basic tune-ups with fingers numbed from the cold. A northwest wind is coming in strong. It's not snowing now but it feels like it might and the ground is still covered from

a few days ago. My car runs flawlessly on the backroads from my apartment to the hotel. I am in control. A Tom Petty song is playing on the radio and I turn it up but I don't sing along. Time passes glacially as I see the night's first small flakes; I also see red lights flashing. A Subaru with Illinois plates is on the side of the road with a cloud of white smoke billowing from the hood. A well-dressed man is standing by the car. His face is alternately obscured by darkness and illuminated by hazard lights. I know most of the people in town and I don't recognize him. I pull over.

"It's a cold night for your car to overheat," I say.

"It's never done this before." He's shivering cold and his soft voice is shaking. "It's never really given me any kind of problems."

"They're good cars. Where were you heading?"

He waves some of the white smoke away from his face. "I don't know—Duluth eventually. I was getting tired on the road and thought I'd pull over and look for a restaurant or some coffee and maybe somewhere to get a room for the night. There's supposed to be a hotel around here somewhere, right?"

"There is," I say. "I work at the Snow Creek Lodge. It's not three miles from here. I'm on my way there now."

"What luck!" he says, cupping his hands around his mouth for warmth. He drops the hood and extends an unsteady hand for me to shake. "I'm Travis. I'm from Chicago. Like I said, on my way up to Duluth."

"I'm Tasha," I tell him. "Tasha Talbot. Hop in and I'll give you a lift to the hotel."

Travis sits nervously in the passenger seat with a black suitcase on his lap. He clutches the handle of it like a child with a safety blanket. "Thanks for the ride," he says. "Do you happen to know a mechanic who might take a look at my car in the morning?"

"I can fix it," I tell him. "I'd say you probably need a new thermostat. The parts store opens at nine in the morning. I can probably have you back on the road by lunchtime."

"You can," he says. I look over to see him raise an eyebrow. "That's great! How much would I owe you?"

"Let's see—thirty bucks for the room tonight. I'd say somewhere around twenty-five for the thermostat. We'll see what Jerry is charging for one in the morning. Plus, another ten or so for a jug of coolant."

"That all sounds more than fair. I really don't know a thing about cars. I work in sales." Travis says this with embarrassment, like he's confessing to something shameful. "If you could do the repair, I'd gladly pay you for your trouble."

"It's no trouble. I fix people's cars all the time. I don't charge for it." I park in front of the office. The sky is much darker now, and, in the white light of the stars, Travis looks very small and pale. His sandy hair nearly blends with the snow. "Come into the office and I'll get you set up with a key."

My sister is behind the desk reading a book. She doesn't look up

until she hears Travis—a stranger—say hello.

"This is Travis from Chicago," I say. "Sorry I'm a little late. I picked him up on my way in. His car overheated and he needs a room for the night."

She smiles and fixes her eyes on Travis. "It's nice to meet you. I'm Layla, Tasha's sister."

"Nice to meet you, Layla. I'm so grateful for the room."

"Did Tasha take a look at your car?" she asks. "She can probably have you up and running in no time!"

"I think it's his thermostat," I say. "I'm going to head down to Jerry's in the morning and pick up the part."

"Here's the key to room six. It's the one over here, right next to the office." Layla motions toward the wall to her left.

"Perfect," he says.

My sister buttons up her coat and grabs a purse from the shelf behind her. Then she pulls out the chair behind the desk so that I can sit down. "He's our first customer of the day. I'd say he's probably the last one too," she says to me, then she turns her attention to Travis. "It's been dead around here lately." Durkheim says that you can't remain absorbed in the contemplation of emptiness without falling into that emptiness. I think Layla wants Travis to say something else. I think she wants something inconceivable. She gets as lonely here as I do. "Have a good night," she says to neither of us specifically. I don't respond and neither does Travis.

It's a quiet night. The snow has picked up but the wind has settled down. I am passing the time reading an auto-parts magazine. I hear the hot water pipes come to life as Travis starts a shower next door. I'm not sure why but Stuart is heavy on my mind. I think—for a moment—that maybe Travis reminds me of Stuart in some way, but I know that he doesn't. Pascal says that evil and sadness is the result of our inability to quietly sit still in a room.

The office door creaks open and it startles me. I don't expect any customers this time of night. Travis is smiling sheepishly in the doorway. His hair is still wet from the shower. "I hate to bug you. You've already done so much. Would you happen to know of a bar or a restaurant? Maybe one within walking distance?"

"No bars around here," I say, "it's a dry county. No restaurant either, not one that you'd want to walk to in this weather."

Travis looks defeated. Does loneliness find everything in this hotel? Weil says that all sins are attempts to fill a void.

"I might still have a bottle of Wild Turkey in my desk." I open the bottom drawer to find exactly enough whiskey for us each to have one drink. It's a bit less than I thought there'd be. Layla must have stumbled across it during one of her shifts and helped herself. "I think I've got enough here for a couple of drinks."

"That sounds fantastic!"

My hand finds the two glasses from behind the desk that seem to be the cleanest. I don't have any ice. I pour two neat drinks, filling them as

evenly as I can. I ask Travis about going to Duluth but slowly I notice that I'm not listening to his response. By the time I am, it is a little hard to follow. He is getting upset; he looks like he might cry and I wish that I had paid better attention to his story. Can I ask him to start over? I can't.

I piece together that he is married and that he has told his wife that he is gone somewhere north on a business trip, but his plan was actually to go to Duluth to meet with another woman. Travis is wrapped in guilt. He says that he's decided not to go through with it and that he's just going to spend a weekend in Duluth alone to clear his mind. He looks into his glass of Wild Turkey with pained but selfish eyes.

"I've never been grateful to her," he says nakedly. "She deserved so much of my gratitude but it's just not there." Kant says that ingratitude is the essence of the vile.

"You do seem to love her," I say, mostly because I feel like I should say something. Travis looks at me as if I misunderstand him in some profound way. Or maybe he just remembers that I am here.

"Do you like working at a hotel?" Travis clears his throat and straightens his posture.

"I suppose so. It's usually pretty slow. We don't get too many people through here. I read a lot of these." I hold up my magazine. "And a lot of books."

"You're really into cars, huh? That's great! Thanks again—in advance—for looking at mine in the morning." Just like that, Travis was never on the verge of tears in front of me. I have no idea if I am in control. "Have you ever thought of working as a mechanic? Getting paid for it, I mean."

"I thought about it. Not for me," I say.

"Well, have you been working on cars long?" he asks.

"Sort of." I don't know how to answer him.

"Don't take this the wrong way but—" he stops contemplatively. "Well, most mechanics are—men. How'd you get into working on cars?" Schopenhauer says that we mistake our own limitations for the limits of the world around us. "Did your dad teach you?"

"No." Maybe it's the Wild Turkey but I actually want to tell him. My stomach is an anxious knot, but I do speak. "I was nineteen years old. I was still dating my first boyfriend. We started dating when we were freshmen in high school. It seems so long ago now. We talked about getting married, kids." Camus says there is no love of life without despair of life.

I pause for too long, and Travis asks me what his name is.

"His name was Stuart," I say.

"What happened to him?" Travis is distraught. Or maybe I am imagining that he is, projecting. Maybe he is bored. I don't think I'm in control.

"My car wouldn't start. It's the same car you rode in earlier to get here. My Jetta—it wouldn't turn over—and I didn't know anything about cars at the time. So I call Stuart and I ask him to come help me. He was no mechanic, but he was pretty handy. He says that he can't come because he's

been drinking with some friends. He says that he doesn't think he should drive." Bronte says that remorse is the poison of life. "But I really wanted to go to this party with my friends. No one would give me a ride. Stuart wouldn't come help get the car started. He tells me to try to find the solenoid and to hit it with a hammer or something. I hang up and I just wait a few minutes. I never told anyone, but I never even tried to find it." Chardin says that it is our duty to proceed as if our abilities have no limits. "After three or four minutes I call him back. I told him that I looked—even though I didn't—and I said I couldn't find it. He told me that he'd come to my house and take a look."

The glass of Wild Turkey is shaking in my hand. I notice that his is empty, but mine still has a bit left. "So he drove to come help you?" Travis asks. I am not in control. I am not at all in control.

"He never made it." Bukowski says to find what you love and let it kill you. I have never been in control. "He hit some ice and wrapped his Trans Am around a telephone pole. He never woke up. About a week later, he died." I have never, ever been in control. I don't know how long I have been crying; I don't know what to make of the look on Travis' face.

"You were a kid. You can't blame yourself." Travis doesn't say that it wasn't my fault, and I know that it's because he would be lying. Comte says that the dead govern the living. I don't want Travis to be here anymore. Through the office window, I can see that it is snowing, heavily.

"I wanted to know for sure—if I had gone out there and hit that solenoid—if it would have gotten it to start. I read all I could about it, and that does work sometimes. Since then I've gotten it to work dozens of times."

"Was it the solenoid that wasn't working?" he asks. "Or was it something else?"

"I don't know," I say. "I tore that car apart and rebuilt it three times before I could bring myself to try and start it. I guess I thought that if I could just fix whatever was wrong with it—everything that could be wrong with it—" Locke says that what worries you, masters you.

Travis is looking at me with the eyes of a confidante. Now they are the eyes of a menace; now they're a judge's; now they're a killer's; now they are no one's. Travis leaves and there is nothing left in the night, nothing for me. It all grows dark, darker. Then—with crisis on the tip of my tongue—it is morning; I have to fix his car. I know what the thermostat is supposed to do, how it's supposed to work. I know how to fix it. I am in control. I have always been in control. Zappfe says that we come from an inconceivable something, live an inconceivable life, and then vanish into an inconceivable nothing.

Self Portrait
by beth a. ecker

A Lucid Dream of Her
by mauro nieto

The light of her shiny silhouette, as the blue hue
of the mountain ridge. Acquired by consensus,
calmly moving at the rhythm of her breath.

She was only a dream, her glowing heat still on every inch
of the white crispy sheets. She is the morning particles
floating by the windowsill, so close yet unattainable,
captivating, fleeting, graceful.

The melodious chant of a thousand women, funneled into her voice.
Her breath carried the scent of forest and valleys,
it saturated the room with the fragrance of flowers and trees
coloring my thoughts with white, yellow, and red.

She felt fresh like moss—soothing, humid, and full of life.
Her fingers lightly scratch every corner of my mind,
slowly carving her face in my brain. Her skin as different soils,
golden, some darker and fertile, as the banks of a fruitful river.

Her hair, a maze impossible to scape from.
The shade of her body painted in my chest, with her clear thin saliva,
made sex feel like love, and love feel like sex.

Birthing a Prophet
by e. ryann roth

Twice I have given birth to a child. The first time was to Ezra Timothy, meaning Helper and Servant of God. I gave him this name because it echoed the ease with which he had come into this world, and because there were no other names his father and I could agree on.

"Don't you think he looks like an Ezra?"

"Sure," his father said, gazing at his wrinkled son over my shoulder.

I slept, because what else is there to do after forcing an 8lb 15oz being out of a 10 centimeter opening in your body? We wouldn't sleep for days after that.

I can tell you the name of our second child, but I will tell you first that his name was the result of a more spiritual phase in our life. Also, my mother was set to arrive at the hospital. We did not want to combat her opinionated commentary in the naming process. Oscar Nathaniel. Spear of God, Compassionate One. We had been told during a church prayer service that he would have the gift of prophecy, which in turn would require both strength and mercy. We were told at the hospital that he had an unusually large head. I guess prophets require that too.

If I were a more practical person I would have accepted the offer to induce labor instead of taking castor oil, would have chosen the hospital a mere ten minutes from our home instead of the one thirty minutes away, and would not have had to labor mostly in the car during midday traffic. This was my initiation to parenting a prophet of God, nothing is easy or practical. I woke up that morning, and it was exciting to think that later this day I would have a baby in my arms. I prepared a large breakfast and felt as though we were having a farewell party, goodbye to our little family of three and hello to not sleeping through the night. Sleep, who needs sleep? We sleep enough, and few of us really utilize our waking time to its fullest potential anyway. It makes me realize that the best thing I am doing is growing children. A person who is surrendering sleep to the nourishment of babes knows the holiness of giving oneself completely to another. Soon, sleeping through the night makes a woman feel indulged—and, lo, she has a thing for birthing children.

My husband, Andrew, handed me the orange juice and castor oil mix, stirring. I hesitantly took the glass from him, and then chugged, as if I was unperturbed by the thick, bitter liquid pooling in my mouth. A flash and orange juice becomes the tannin of blessed red wine slipping down my throat for the first time. A dress of white frills and a veil upon my seven year old head, I humbly accept this First Communion Rite, this worshiping of pain shed for the life of others.

I handed the glass back and made a hacking noise, gagging, and smacking. Andrew considerately poured a glass of pure orange juice as a chaser, and handed me the glass as if toasting my bravery, my fortitude in this upcoming endeavor. Me, a belly the size of a candy roaster pumpkin and

equally as dense; he, my lanky partner, but not really, a co-conspirator, but not really, just a cheerleader, maybe even just a witness. He doesn't really have to go through the pain, or wake in the middle of the night, or leak milk from his nipples during lovemaking; he doesn't have to surrender his body.

We made preparations over the next four hours, packing a hospital bag with toothbrushes and baby clothes, expecting contractions any minute. Note: Prophets do not come when expected. They do however, according to *Merriam-Webster*, "utter divinely inspired revelations." I looked it up when we had been given this divinely inspired revelation of our child to come. And I suppose revelation is worth waiting for.

So, we napped on the couch next to the fire and I talked with my grandmother on the phone. Who would have guessed that's when it would happen?

I was sitting on the floor in front of the fire, a train suddenly wrecking inside my stomach, just like that, out of nowhere, and I moved awkwardly to my hands and knees, still holding the phone with one hand, "Nana, I've got to go!"

I hung up on her.

As I kneeled in cat and cow position on the floor and moaned, Andrew woke and stared at me, surprised by this inevitable moment. Why are we continually surprised by that which we know is certain to happen? Birth, death, sickness, car accidents, the aging of children in the long lapses of time since we last saw them. C.S. Lewis compares us to fish constantly being surprised by the water that surrounds us. Ridiculous-- unless, however, we are not meant to always be in water. We are meant for eternity and for a place where our suffering is relieved. So, perhaps pain is a prophetic promise of a time to come.

We needed to get a sitter for Ezra before we did anything. We needed to alert the midwife on-call. This was definitely happening quickly. Had I not noticed anything before this? The contractions had come more gradually the last time I had been in labor. Hours watching movies and enduring contractions at home before needing to rush off to the hospital. I breathed deeply and waddled to the bathroom feeling an incessant urge to pee and poop. I sat on the cold porcelain and wondered if this baby would come right out into the toilet. If Christ was born in a manger, why not a prophet in a toilet?

I came out and collapsed, again on all fours onto the marbled tile. I rocked back and forth, bracing myself on a nearby kitchen chair as I continued to moan. These were sounds and positions usually reserved for the most intimate of bedroom acts—acts that usually involved a naked body clinging and scrambling to come into me, not desperately clawing to come out.

Andrew phoned the midwife, trying to convince her of the urgency of the situation, then, holding the phone out so she could hear my breathing and inability to communicate outside of pained grunts. The contraction subsided and I took a breath. There. Just enough time to limp to the car. I crawled into the passenger side, unable to sit for the pressure, a bowling ball bear-

ing down on my cervix about to be blown out the ball return like a cannon; I kneeled backwards in the seat and gripped the head rest for support.

Andrew grabbed the hospital bag after passing instructions on to the now arrived babysitter, and climbing into the driver side shouted, "Here we go!" That's what the director of our First Communion had said before she pushed us excitedly from church foyer to church sanctuary. Boys and girls nervously processing in two straight lines toward the looming altar, new patent leather padding softly on thick red carpet.

I gave a weak sideways smile and Andrew said, "Are you really going to ride like that?"

I nodded and grimaced and dug my fingers into the headrest harder. My forehead leaned against the textured seat and I could feel the pattern imprinting my skin. He watched me and glanced at the clock before pulling out of the driveway.

"So are they getting closer together?"

"Yes."

"Are they that painful?"

"Yes!"

"How far apart?"

"Just get me to the hospital."

"OK. I can do that."

"Thanks."

"Don't give birth in the car."

"I'll do my best."

He reached out his hand and stroked my back as I retreated into myself, feeling a magnetic pull on the little planet inside of me, a planet with its own culture and preferences and rules of engagement. The car swerved quickly around mountain curves and I prayed that I would not vomit.

"They've taken I-40 down to two lanes for the construction."

"Shit!" Tears of desperation.

"We'll get through. I'm going eighty."

"I hope we don't get pulled over."

"Then we'll get an escort. This guy won't get out of my way."

I held on. Andrew zigzagged through traffic, nearly missing orange cones. It was suddenly obvious how vulnerable I was, a pregnant woman in labor kneeling backwards without a seat belt hurtling down the highway at eighty miles an hour. We propelled past a zooming motorcycle. Andrew laughed. I laughed, too, for different reasons, not really sure we would make it to the hospital before having this baby. He veered onto our exit.

"I feel like I want to push."

"Don't. There's only a few stoplights to go."

"I can't hold it."

"You have to."

"I really want to push!"

"We're almost there. I'm not delivering this baby."

"I have to go to the bathroom."

The light turned green and he proceeded as quickly as he could to the next light, and stopped, again, at a red light. Cars lined up in front and behind us, and I focused through the space in the head rest, through the back window and onto the driver's face behind us. He was a stout looking black man, young but fleshy, glasses. Was he aware of me watching him, of what drama was taking place in front of him? Did he believe in prophets and prophecies? The light was still red.

I tried not to focus on the pain, which is like not yawning at Midnight Mass. I thought about our other child. I thought about our breezy decrepit farmhouse. I thought about the cars, the fast food restaurants, the tourists, the damned interminable red light, and, then, the pressure mounting in my uterus. This pain might never subside and this baby might never come out and I might never relax again. Sometimes, in winter, the house was so cold, there was nothing to do but sleep, curl up under deep down comforters and wool blankets and snuggle close together—that need to snuggle the cause of all this damned pain. With the wind seeping in through the floorboards and the frost on the inside of the single paned windows, it had seemed I would never be able to get warm. It seemed unlikely that someone who was just now sweating bullets and writhing with intensity would ever have that problem again.

I noticed the long line at the *McDonalds* drive thru. I felt the bump, bump of the railroad tracks under the car and saw the man behind us turn down a side road. He had been my grounding to all things outside of my suffering, he had been my crucifix hanging over the altar of my pain, and he was forsaking me! My body flooded with heat, like the moment before you throw up, and I focused on the spinning wheels rolling past. The dizziness increased. The pressure released. I felt my water breaking like the contents of a mop bucket being emptied. Andrew's eyes grew wide and he said,

"What was that?"

"Either I just peed on myself or my water just broke."

"Really?! Good thing I put that plastic bag and towel down."

"Uh, good thing we're almost to the hospital."

"I'm going to pull into the emergency room drive. The midwife said she was meeting us there."

"O.K."

"Is it this turn? I don't remember."

"Yes."

"Let's do this!"

"Oh, let's. . ."

He pulled up and parked in front of the emergency room doors. Andrew squeezed my hand, his hand large and warm around my shaking one. He flung his door open, ran around and helped me out and into a waiting wheelchair. Again, I could not sit, but only kneel backwards on the blue vinyl

before sinking back into another rush of fire in my abdomen.

I saw the midwife's eyes grow large as she realized that labor had progressed a lot further than she was expecting. Andrew rested his hand on my sweaty, frizzy head and I knew I could do this as long he was here. I had not always wanted a husband or children. There was a time in my life when I thought I would be a nun. I never thought I would have come to this. At twenty-two, I envisioned living as a missionary in another country, learning another language, making a difference in people's lives.

My identity had been shaped by moments like that First Communion-- Confirmation, expansive churches, stained glass windows, The Lives of the Saints. Those saints were my heroes-- St. Francis of Assisi giving up all his family's wealth to walk barefoot among the cobblestones and proclaim the Love of God. Sunday Mass was my refuge from a complicated reality. I wonder if Jesus was ever surprised by where he ended up—suffering on a cross and dying so that all the world could have new life. Did he have other plans or dreams? When did he know that suffering was inevitable? I remind myself, I am glad I am here. Are not all of our lives journeys through suffering and death to new life?

We rolled into the elevator. I watched the floors like magic coins light up one after another; it felt forebodingly welcome.

"We are headed up to the room and I'm right here with you, you're doing great, just hang in there."

"Thanks." We rolled down the medicinal green hallway into a room with a bed and monitors. With a little help I climbed onto the bed and rolled onto my back. No time for monitors.

"Breathe and listen to the midwife."

"I'm not sure I can do it. It really hurts!" The tears started to come again and I felt Andrew's hand on my shoulder. I was pretty sure this was the end, I was going to die and he was going to be there to see it. My body was going to rip into two and some alien was going to climb out.

"It'll be over soon."

"If it isn't, I'm not sure I can do it."

"O.K., here's what you're going to do," Andrew repeated everything the midwife said, whispering in my ear. "You're pushing on the gas pedal, accelerate, keep accelerating. . .now ease off, that's right, stop pushing."

"I'm really hot. Get my shirt off. . ." The car analogy was not helping.

"I've got it." He detangled me from my clothes as I frantically pulled them off. "Now, get ready to push again. . .Go."

"I can't!"

"You can."

"Owww!"

"The head is crowning. It's almost here. Two more big pushes. You're almost done."

I squeezed Andrew's hand in a way that said if I'm going to hurt, you are going to hurt too. Why do we insist on inflicting our own pain upon

others? It is not enough for us to be in pain, we must bully others so that they too suffer. I asked myself if I would ever submit to a C-Section, a question I had been asking ever since I got pregnant the first time. The answer always used to be no. But in all those months and that first labor the sensations had never been so overwhelming and drugs nor scalpel had ever been applied or even suggested. I was now less and less compliant to medical intervention; in fact, I distrusted doctors implicitly. In this case, however, I had to say yes. Yes, I would.

I pushed the child out the channel between my legs and into the lighted world, and then, without a thought for the blood and mucous and waxy film on his naked body, I brought him to my bare chest.

The child was another boy. He squirmed and squalled in my arms, made sure the world knew he was here. I focused on him. I shook. I cried from mere exhaustion. I pushed one last time as the midwife tugged the placenta out by the umbilical cord that still connected us, a release like Velcro tearing from my insides. It was done. We were separated forever. I surveyed the room around me. There were a host of nurses and midwives, none of whom I had realized were even in the room five minutes before. But they all had borne witness. They had seen me naked, legs spread, sprawled on the bed, panting, in sweat, blood, and defecation—the midwives having cleanly wiped the latter away as quickly as it came, and even then, I hadn't been aware, every tender part of my lower body numbed by the all-consuming ring of fire. This child had spent me completely. And he had only just arrived.

Prophets are relentless and stubborn. They have to be. They are asked by God to tell people difficult news again and again until those people finally listen. And if they don't obey, the consequences are big- they get swallowed by whales. Even if they do obey, they get cast into lions' dens.

"Well, what should we call him?"

Andrew spoke. He stood taller and his voice was softer, man eyes made young with wonder. Was he holding back tears? I smiled. I consulted a list of names he handed me from our hospital bag.

"What do you think about Oscar? It means spear. He certainly came like one." I hoped Andrew would like the name as much as I did.

"Well, we'll need something to balance that out. Lord, help us."

"Nathaniel? It means compassionate one."

"How do you even spell that?" We hesitated. Naming is a serious business; a name is what you become. A name is how the world sees you. When you are Confirmed, you receive a new name. When you are married, you receive a new name. Were we going to fully embrace this prophet idea? Commit our son, ourselves, to that sort of struggle? We didn't have time to deliberate.

An obese nurse appeared at the computer beside us huffing and puffing in his scrubs that matched the color of the walls. He settled his round frame on a stool with wheels, and the air compressed in the shaft as he sat down. I never saw his face, only the doughy rolls on the back of his fuzzy head

as he droned on.

"Congratulations. We just have to record some information," he said robotically, fingers like swollen sausages beginning to type.

We looked at each other with raised eyebrows, "Okay." We waited and responded to the perfunctory questions, names, dates of birth, address, phone number, all the information usually gathered upon entrance to the emergency room. I wanted to yell, "I just pushed a small human out of my vagina! Could you give us a minute?!" But I knew how this would sound, so I just answered the questions and signed the paperwork. We each received hospital bracelets with barcodes. Oscar's body was weighed (10lbs 2oz), head was measured, heel was pricked, eyes checked. Welcome to the world baby boy-- you're not in the womb anymore.

That evening, I found myself lying in another hospital room, the Mother and Baby Floor. I had been served a bland but filling hospital meal and scarfed it, and then I had an idea that I might take a shower. But shuffling tenderly to the bathroom I stopped, responding to the whimper and then cry of a child in a clear plastic crib on wheels at the end of my bed. The shower would have to be postponed. I lifted him up and rested back on the bed to feed him. As he awkwardly nursed, I fingered the plastic band around his wrist and considered that this child was actually mine, the plastic band said so. Not really mine I knew, but entrusted to me. Nobody was going to control this child or shackle him with plastic labels telling him who he belonged to, he was determined, his own person. Then the fear began to rise before me like an army on the horizon. I could not effectively accomplish this task, raising a prophet. I had visions of him going to kindergarten, saw his first kiss, saw him graduating from college. He was abandoning me like he had already abandoned my body.

I let go of the idea of showering altogether and just hoped to carry him close a little longer. I curled up on the starched sheets with my baby and my husband and I thought this both the saddest and most precious moment of our lives. If only I could hold on to it. I was consumed by complete exhaustion, made sweet by the hard earned reward. Nothing else existed tonight, only the blinking lights of the nearby monitors and the hum of the air condition and the little squeaks of Oscar Nathaniel and the gentle creases that I traced along my husband's sleeping cheek. And the stiff, gentle scratch of a matching hospital band on my wrist.

Over the course of Oscar's life, I've been tried many times and each time I went back to that wristband moment. Not in the same physical way, but emotionally. Try telling a miniature prophet "no" and Hell beware when it is an issue of God's word and not just Oscar's opinion. He is mine, but he is not mine. He is stubborn and set in his ways, not compromising like his older brother. And Oscar is the one that teaches me. I once had to leave Sunday school with him because he refused to apologize to his little friend Iris for being mean to her-- carrying him, hitting me, kicking, and screaming all the way to the car. On the way home, he unbuckled en route, leaned into the

front seat, grabbed at the steering wheel, furiously whacking the windshield wipers up and down; apparently conviction of the heart is the most important part of repentance. Travelling to Colorado once, he blankly refused to put his stuffed animal through the airport's x-ray machine—for God sees not as man sees, for a man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart-- resulting in security intervention and a nearly missed plane flight. He has gone to bed hungry after refusing dinners I've prepared and woken up grumpy with a grumbling stomach of his own making; I suppose this will help with the fasting. He has been known to sprawl naked on his bedroom floor for a quarter of an hour bemoaning that he has nothing to wear when a chest of drawers lies full to the brim with perfectly good clothes. Perhaps, it is the discipline of wearing clothes that will prepare him, like John the Baptist wearing camel hair in the desert. On school days, Oscar waits until departure time, everyone else waiting in the car, before beginning a five minute deliberation on what shoes to wear. Andrew and I have been worn down by the incessant attacks pitched at us by this little person, now only five years old. Our patience spreads thin. We find ourselves pit against each other despite the need for a unified front. I am most likely to impassively go about my business while the little beast throws himself at me, if I lose composure he is in control. Andrew is most likely to attack when provoked, striving beyond reason to prove to a forty inch person that he, at ninety two inches, will win. Some things are hard to explain.

I am not sure I can do all this over again. The birthing, the sleepless nights, the power struggles, and grasping for one moment alone like a drowning woman gasping for air. And yet a new life flutters within me, a butterfly beating at the inside of the cocoon. An undertow of dread washes my feet out from under me, that yet another child might demand from me this perfecting sacrifice of pure abandon.

This evening, I had to compel Oscar by threat of spankings and discarded Halloween candy to take a shower before bed. After his shower, he came, wet and naked, wrapped in a towel, to stand before the cast iron stove in the living room. He lay there on the floor basking in the heat of the fire, whimpering, his tired limp body reminding me of his birth day, all that pain and fighting for this little soul to emerge at last. I rarely see that surrendered side of him. And when I do, I'm so bombarded by responsibilities I don't always cherish it, like ice cream in the middle of winter.

I sat in the living room and watched my little boy lying naked on the floor. He was contrite now—we all were— wanting a peaceful end to the day. He wanted a story before bed. He wasn't screaming anymore; he brushed his teeth and peed without pleas and threats. It occurred to me now that I had lost myself entirely. He needed my patience. I tucked Oscar in under the covers: my husband downstairs watching a football game, pouring himself a beer. I snuggled up next to Oscar in the bed and read from Giant Stories. Our story was about a little boy with a secret who is captured by giants on his way home because he refused to tell them his secret. When he finally discloses

his secret, the giants run screaming, leaving the little boy to run home and share his secret with his mother. She does not run. Mothers do not run, we surrender—we submit to the pain, the abuse, the ungratefulness, the intermittent opportunities to shower uninterrupted. We must endure. I suppose Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, endured when her son's head was delivered to Herod on a platter. Or maybe she died first of old age. I looked down at my little boy and felt a tidal wave of tenderness. I am set adrift, no hope of ever reaching the shore. What used to be a shore now only appears in the distance as an island of selfishness and control where I used to live. It isn't too late. I can still cherish him. I can cherish all my children. Joy and desire rise within me.

I listened to the sound of my husband hollering at the T.V. screen. Our older boy perched on the arm of his father's chair, simultaneously imitating and idolizing Andrew. Ezra needed to be put to bed. But I stayed there on Oscar's bed watching him sleep. Minutes passed, almost half an hour. Daylight savings time had ended the day early. My husband was downstairs beginning a video game now and I was about to turn out the light. The rain was falling on the tin roof and I was about to turn out the light.

Little Rabbit's Big Sleep
by zach walters

A stagnant moisture hung in the air; it smelled like rain. I startled the old man when I came in. I think he was sleeping. Larry pretended not to be startled. I pretended I bought it. Larry was always making this certain face. Well not always but a lot. The face looked wide-eyed like an old owl's face right before he snatches a mouse in between his talons; it pierces straight through you. It's ok. I really don't think he means to do it.

I had come by to mow the grass for a few bucks, but I was disheveled and felt so lazy I could cry. No – I told myself, don't even look. That won't help matters. Storm clouds loomed overhead, dense and bloated with rain. I faithfully started the mower and pushed forward. I wanted desperately to prove to myself, to Larry, to anyone, that I was a good worker. A hard worker. I was worried about money; my car was breaking down. The rent was due, I owed money to a hospital in Hawaii, I was constantly in a fog, and were those antidepressants I was taking really – the mower choked abruptly, and I lifted it up to see a small creature writhing in its own blood beneath the whirring blade.

My feet somehow sank a little deeper into the earth when I saw the mangled head of a baby bunny. I stopped the lawn mower, and looked at him bleeding out all over the grass. He was such a cute little guy I was scared to look at what I had done. I felt like vomiting, but my stomach didn't turn. I was chanting a mantra of "fuck" when I ran inside. Larry looked at me wide-eyed. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"No sir," I responded, almost laughing, although I'm not sure why.

"He's dead." Larry said, stooping down with a somber affect.

"No he's not- He's still moving." I said accusingly, poking the rabbit gently with my index finger. The rabbit twitched.

"Well he's going to be dead soon."

"Aren't we all?" is what I wish that I said but instead I just stared blankly into the dirt. Larry's son, Joe, had died in a motorcycle crash a couple years ago. He was only 22. He was my best friend. I still can't imagine life without him; but here I am, without him, imagining life with him. For some reason he was the first thing that popped in my head after I saw that rabbit bleeding out all over the grass. For some reason, I suspect Larry was thinking the same thought too. When someone that loved goes that young, they don't pass easy. There's no magic tonic you can buy at Rite-Aid that makes someone slip from one world into the next easy

like a loose stool or a baby burp. It builds up as hard as a rock inside you, and there's only one way it comes out: one little, jagged piece at a time.

The right side of the rabbit's face was a crimson pulp of muscle and blood. His ear was gone. I tried hard to imagine if the roles were reversed, and someone ran over me with a giant lawn mower. Completely unfathomable. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hit you." I whispered, stroking the bunny's soft fur. If I was a bigger man, I might have wept, unrestrained by social conventions and unburdened by the fear of vulnerability. Instead, not a single tear.

"Go find the shovel." Larry said. If he was a bigger man, he might have wept too. I couldn't find the shovel. I returned with a rusty pick-axe. "Do you want me to finish him off?" Larry asked. He was trying to protect me. Suddenly, I felt like I was standing there with a father I had never had.

"No. I can do it." I was certain this was some weird rite of passage. Larry tried to gauge my sincerity looking back, and pausing, before he shut the door. Not yet, I decided; I would wait. What if he lived? While I was mowing, the photograph of the maimed rabbit flashed relentlessly in my mind. I turned a corner, and there he was. I made a U-turn, and there he was: the bloody bunny. One ear, half a face. I was so sorry. Did the bunny understand I was sorry? Did he understand the concept of an accident? Or was the mower just a malicious, metal beast that had tried to eat him? I shut the mower off and stood in the dim grass. I knelt down to the rabbit's burrow and saw him sitting still and breathing heavy. I touched his back, gently, in fear I might further hurt him. He jumped away. I stood there a long time. Was I going to have to kill him? Was it really necessary? Was it really the kinder thing to do? Larry came out looking – annoyed? There was a slight hint of sadness in his eyes that would be undetectable to a layman. But not me. I was an expert in Larry.

"Did you take care of it yet?" he asked forgivingly, knowing that I hadn't.

"No." Larry grabbed the Pick-axe.

"What if he lives?" I asked.

"Think about it, have you ever seen a rabbit with half a face?" Larry said, nearing the burrow. I hadn't.

"Wait, I can do it." I insisted.

"I'm just digging it a bed." Larry was gently scooping out earth from the burrow. Three, then four baby rabbits hopped out of the burrow and into the tall grass. Somehow this only made things more horrible. My eyes followed them to the canopy of the high grass. They were already invisible. My anxiety was flaring

up. Larry blanketed the rabbit in question with a handful of dried grass.

"There. He's in his bed. He'll be dead soon, don't worry about him." He went back inside.

That day I hadn't been very good at following instructions. I ran the lawn mower for about three minutes, and then I returned to his side. He still twitched when I poked him. His wounds didn't look any better. He seemed to be possibly struggling for breath, but he was very much alive. I checked again. Nope, still alive. I imagined a complete miracle. Maybe his mother would tend to him, with undivided attention, for nights on end, making sure he had enough to eat and slowly nursing him back to health. Maybe his face would heal up and he would be just fine, living a full rabbit life and raising his own rabbits one day.

His mother would probably abandon him, knowing that all hope was lost, knowing that nature doesn't piss in the wind when there are other mouths to feed. Nature is wonderful that way, I guess. He would suffer in silence, alone and scared, eventually dying sometime in the limp, damp night. Is that how, I too, might one day die?

Larry came outside again. Was I going to keep this poor old man going in and out? We knew what time it was.

"Ok." I said. Larry hadn't said anything. I raised the pick axe. "This is so hard." I struggled to make words with my mouth. I stood there, wavering, for what seemed like an eternity. I stared down at the rabbit, huddled against the earth, heaving.

"Just do it." Larry said sternly.

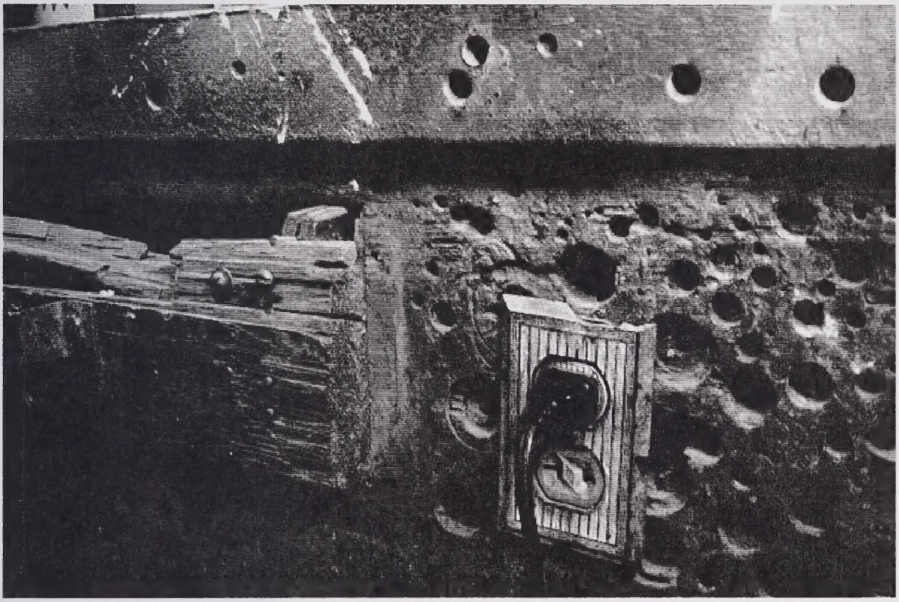
"Ok, be strong," inner dialogue said. How would a tough guy kill a baby bunny with a pick-axe? I swung wild and clumsy, and the rabbit began trying to burrow as soon as I struck him. I wasn't sure it was a solid blow; the rabbit was thrashing. I swung over and over again in a horrified frenzy, striking dirt and rabbit, until I couldn't tell what I was hitting. The rabbit's cries pierced me in a way that made me certain I was a murderer. The squeals bit back, so shrill and frail that I felt something deep inside me collapsing, trying to escape from my throat and from my eyes. I was shaken but I tried to hide, like I was in a wetsuit.

"Do you think I killed it?" I asked nervously.

"If not, it will be dead soon." Larry said. Not a very comforting response. Everything went kind of foggy after that. It had finally started to rain. I put the lawn mower up under the house and shivered as the drops hit my skin. I got in my car and said goodbye to Larry. I was done. I had never killed anything before, but today I had intimately, and personally, beaten a rabbit to death with a pick-axe.

I felt a sorrow that seemed to well up from deep in the earth, deeper than the rabbit's burrow, deeper than the roots of the trees. It had always been there, existing before land. It was like someone had come and built all this foliage and earth on top of a big ball of sorrow that had just been floating, lonely in space.

Larry stopped me on my way out of the driveway. He looked at me with those hidden sad eyes, and a half-smirk. "How many more of those bunnies do you think you're gonna have to hit?"



Plug
by samantha smith

Cuando Te Observo
by mauro nieto

Es en medio de tus piernas centro de la vida misma,
y solo tocarte ínsita el crecimiento de nuevas semillas.
Tu cuerpo dorado es un domingo en una iglesia mediterranea,
es porque desnuda haces el amor a los arboles y a las flores.

Las tersas curvas de tus caderas llenas de vida,
y se mueven lentamente como el lecho de un rió.
Esos ojos claros cristalinos siempre hablan de amor,
y describen todo segundos antes de que tu boca se abra.

Estar contigo es como un amanecer entre aves y abejas,
cuando duermes ínsitas nirvana a todo ser cerca de ti.
Tu no hablas, solo cantas con tu vos de mar los tonos
dulces y suaves del amor de la pasión.

Amarte es tan fácil como abrirse a los rayos del sol,
y tu amistad es cual mosaico persa hermoso y elaborado.
Los lunares de tu espalda y pechos son copias de constelaciones,
Que llevan en ellos a diminutos mundos lejanos. Por eso mismo,
el universo es el pequeño nido que guardas en tus entrañas.

Tranquilizers
by oskar gambony-steding

I think it is a great idea, and I don't want her to think my enthusiasm is waning, but the fact remains there is a Fox sleeping on our dining room table and we are almost out of tranquilizers. We should have bought a kennel, or at least some ropes. It will be angry when it wakes. There are tiny bald spots where its skin was burned when we first applied the bleach to its hair. It turns out fox hair and skin is extremely sensitive.

"Shit, shit, shit," she'd said during this first attempt. I was peeking out of the blinds to our tiny porch when the smell of bleach became burning skin and the Fox gave an unconscious whimper. She'd collapsed onto the floor in front of our stove. Her hands rubbed her knees and her bottom lip trembled.

"Hey," I'd said squatting down to hold her. "Don't worry, baby, we can find another way." Really I wasn't sure how outraged she could be. She is not a vegan. She supports this type of suffering breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I am a vegan. She should be comforting me. Still, it is difficult to experience cruelty first hand, and I am sorry for her.

"We should have got the organic brand," she'd begun crying lightly, "it was only two dollars more."

The organic brand was two thirty-nine more and money is tight. "You said it yourself that stuff washes out after two weeks." I kissed her on the forehead. "What kind of circus would that be?" When I'd leaned my head into hers my cheek brushed against the rough stubble where her hair had been.

She gasped and pointed to the table. The Fox stirred and stretched his groggy head. I did a quick somersault across the floor and withdrew my blowgun from its clip-on holster. The holster was originally twelve dollars but the guy brought it down to seven because he liked me. I took a deep breath while steadying my scope to align with the Fox's delicate neck and blew. There was a tiny whistle as the dart flew from the chamber and the Fox collapsed. Bulls-eye.

This was fifteen minutes ago and that was our second-to-last dart.

Now I am pacing between the doorway of the dining room and the kitchen and am wondering what the hell we are going to do with only one more dart. There is nowhere to keep it, there is nothing to feed it, and our apartment complex is a twenty-minute drive from any suitable habitat. It would be cruel to let it back into the wild after everything we have put it through. We are doing this to give it a better life, to give all of us a better life.

She is mixing the blue dye on the kitchen counter. We are going ahead with the plan without the bleach. "After all," she'd said when we were figuring out what to do, "wouldn't a turquoise fox still be the most exquisite thing you have ever seen?"

I wasn't sure if that's how hair dye worked, the same as mixing paints, but I couldn't disagree. I pause to see how it is coming and she turns her head to smile at me. Her eyes are still a little red. I am still adjusting to her baldness. We decided our plan would be transparent if the ringleader of our circus' hair was the same color as our Fox's. We also thought a bald woman would hold an aura of mystique and respect that would set us apart from our competitors. She pulls it off well. She has a very pretty face, which her hair typically distracts from. She reminds me of the pretty lesbians who would march in protests downtown, though sometimes they scared me and she does not scare me.

She says the dye is of a desired consistency and it is time to begin. She moves the bowl of thick blue to the table beside the Fox and begins applying it to the top of his head. I load my blow-gun with the last dart and train the scope to its neck. It will be waking any minute. The little tufts of fur expand with each of its steady breaths. It is a beautiful animal. Ever since we first caught it I have imagined our life together once we are rich. We will build the Fox a house of its own with rooms of plush and of forest.

"It's working," she says. I look up and see a streak of light green on the Fox's head and sigh relief. She is beaming and I think I might kiss her when suddenly the Fox bites her hand hovering an inch from it's face.

There is only a fragment of surprise on her face before her lip curls. "You little shit," she says and slaps it, her skin vibrating in contempt. Its head is knocked down against the kitchen table and before I know what I am doing my scope is trained on her neck. I blow and there is the whistle and a slight twap and she looks at me the most angry I have ever seen her and I realize I am scared of her as she collapses to our tiled kitchen floor.

Holiday Depression Made Easy!

by jeff horner

We here at *Rhapsodist* Central, located conveniently in the middle of All Things, empathize with you. That's right, you. Put this journal up to your ear right now. Do you hear that heartfelt sweep of string instruments? That's us empathizing.

It's our job, really. Our goal. Art is intersectionality. The Shared Experience. We aim to give as many students and faculty as possible the path to express those experiences. And could there be an experience more universal than holiday ennui in all its sparkly, sale-inducing, occasionally exploding wonder?

Think about what day it is right now. Go ahead. We'll give you a second.

Is it a holiday? If so, we hope you're wearing the appropriate sweater! We bet, at the very least, it's near a holiday, and that segments of your world are preparing for that holiday with the same attention to detail that a bomb shelter owner might alphabetize her canned goods.

And – ack! – are you single? Do you rent? How wonderfully proletariat you are! And what better time than a major holiday to be reminded of your lack of worth as an appropriately celebrating citizen! Where are your multitudes of children singing Arbor Day carols? If you have no lawn of your own to hide Easter eggs, how are you not – at least metaphorically – a sadistic bunny murderer? And let's not even get into Groundhog Day. No need to stir up a religious firestorm over our holiest varmint.

And this, dear reader, is where the *Rhapsodist* staff can help. We've traveled the world researching some of the best techniques available to overcome that realization you have no societal worth to celebrate. Some of us – names held for security reasons – have even gone under cover for decades as single renters, living in relationship and property obscurity, just to create this comprehensive list of some of the best ways you might still find joy in the face of so much actual goodness and happiness around you.

Let's start simple:

Cleanliness is Next to Godliness (In Very Tiny Dictionaries)!

1) Shower daily. Or, heck, at least weekly, all right? And if you can't shower, a bath is almost as good. And if you can't bathe, at least turn your shirt inside out. Again. Schedule a shower tomorrow.

2) Eat healthier. If you can't eat healthier, eat faster. That way, you'll spend less time feeling bad about not eating healthier.

3) Create a new workout routine. Make it fool proof: easy, accessible, yet productive. Grow excited in the warmth of its promise. Shop for expensive clothes online that are two sizes smaller than you are now. Revel in your ingenuity. Consider marketing this plan – a plan even you can follow through on! Allow the phrase "even you can follow through on" to echo in your brain. Now, try it in your mother's voice. Find a mediocre TV show on *Netflix* with at least five seasons that you've already seen. Watch it all again. Realize you're watching it in your workout clothes. Take a nap. Dream of triathlons.

Give Yourself Space (And Carry Bear Mace)!

4) Appreciate window blinds more. They can be your best friends! Learn the proper technique of peeking through them – the secret is minimal eyeball visibility. Venture outside once a month to check on their window coverage. If someone notices you, talk loudly about "the creepy tenant on the second floor." Rush back inside. Peek through the blinds again – got that technique down yet? – to see if they're all watching you. Feel that extra confidence now?

5) Receive lovely texts and social invites from friends. Always refrain from replying. Toss your phone aside with disdain. They can't possibly understand how you can't reply to anyone else until that one woman you've been wooing for months likes your haiku on *Facebook*. You know, the one so subtly about her that's totally funny and not creepy, right? Like you're just being lighthearted in your need to express how you're the only person who can make her happy for the rest of her godforsaken life, and she's flipping crazy for not seeing it? Like she could do better? Like your friend's attention could overcome that? Nobody really likes you. Don't allow sincere expressions of affection to undermine that.

List-i-culture!

6) Make a list of awesome people who died alone. Put it on your mirror to cover that one blood stain. Don't research the list. Never let those liberal Nazis tell you what to do.

7) Make a list of people you want to haunt in the afterlife. Alphabetize it like so many canned goods. Text the ones on the list who you know and warn them. Practice haunting haikus ("boo" is only one syllable, thankfully). Don't worry about warning the famous ones. They won't know who you are, anyway. Allow yourself to anticipate their surprise. It's the little things!

8) Make a list of important lists you know would change your life if you'd only write them. Wonder if this list has now become one of those important lists and if a list can contain itself. Now, your list is a paradox. Bleed from your ears a little. Take a nap.

Xmas Marks The Spot (You Should Get That Looked At)!

9) Buy Christmas stockings at thrift stores embroidered with names you have no connection to: Sherman, Eunice, Myrna. Hang them from your mantle (if you don't have a mantle, staple them to a wall where family photos should have gone). Create personalities for each name. Shop for them at airport kiosks. "Myrna would love a tiny neon fan that sprays a fine mist! And Sherman loves flipping, barking robotic dogs!" Fill each stocking until it overflows. Leave some on the floor with their names carefully printed on the wrapping paper. Step on them occasionally, and curse just like your dad would! Buy surplus Christmas cards. Fill them with thoughtful recollections of the season: "Dear Eunice, how's the hip? The kids think of you every time we drive past cemeteries ..." Make up reasonable addresses for them like 10 Main Street with proper zip codes. Mail them with holiday cheer in your heart. Wait until the end of January, get very drunk (more so than usual), then take the stockings out to your communal dumpster, and throw each gift away, crying loudly. Demand to know when it got so dang cold out. Check your mail. Receive a reply from Eunice. Hide inside until Spring.

Give Them a Piece of Your Mindfulness!

10) Practice meditation whenever you can. If you have trouble at first, realize there are many ways you naturally meditate already, like when you cry in the dark, or when you sit in your car at stop signs, unable to decide which way to turn. You're so much like frigging Buddha already. You're certainly fat enough. Good work, guy!

11) Allow anxiety its proper place. Remember: anxiety is just your body making it clear you aren't good enough. Remember what that PE teacher who always confused your gender would say: "Pain is just weakness leaving the body." The body knows best, so just be better, you worthless jerk. Stop whining. And get a better job. Wipe that look off your face! Now, check outside through the blinds. Better? Better.

Serenity-Apocalypse Now!

12) If all else fails, try causing the apocalypse. You're not found of too many people, anyway. Warn Eunice, if you want. Make it holiday-oriented. Buy an Apocalypse Tree. Decorate it with the skulls of your enemies. Steal their family photos, and use them to cover those stocking holes in your wall. Write apocalypse haikus like:

> Smoldering Wendy's:
> find a wrapper, make some shoes,
> grease-trap smorgasbord.
>
> Nap time!

This list isn't exhaustive, of course. But, sheesh, get off our backs. We work long hours. Go get exhaustive on your own time.

But, what us Rhapsodonians want to express to you, dear reader, is that life is always better than the depressive mindset makes it out to be. Always. That's what makes you stronger than most: you've survived yourself. Again. You've climbed molehills with mountains strapped to your back. You know how to spell Sisyphean! You suffer like Buddha, you cute, little fat guy!

And when that apocalypse does finally happen (see: election 2016), you've spent a lifetime training for it. You'll be appreciated. A natural leader. You totally won't be eaten the first day. We give you a solid month.

contributors

John-Paul Burgin:
Michael Burgin is a Web Technology major and an avid reader. His favorites include Donna Tartt, Patricia Highsmith, and David Foster Wallace. He is also a writer, musician, and native of Western NC.

Abby Cantrell:
Abby doesn't like talking about herself. She would, however, like to talk to you about her dogs.

Beth A. Ecker:
Beth Ann Ecker was born in Norwich,New York in 1977. Beth works predominantly in the medium of acrylic, watercolor and oil painting, but also works in ink, charcoal, and graphite. Beth is graduating from AB Technical College in the spring of 2016 with a degree in Associates in Fine Art. A recipient of the Lavender Fund Scholarship and the Vadim Bora Visual Art Scholarship by the submission of the watercolor painting named "Love" that is now a part of the permanent art collection at AB Tech.

Oskar Gambony-Steding:
c.f.Dwyane Wayne® or The Naked Cowboy®

Gloria Good:
This is the first poem Gloria has written since 2010. She has a BFA in Creative Writing from long ago, and over the years she has written poetry, essays, op-ed pieces, and screenplays--however, she felt she had to quit writing entirely to make the transition of going back to school at AB Tech (which she did after her daughter went to college.) Working and going to school as a middle-aged person is arduous! But writing this poem really felt good.

Abigail Hickman:
Abigail Hickman is a recluse who enjoys drinking milkshakes that are too thick for straws.

Jeff Horner:
Jeff is taller than you remember. Milk®

Andrea Koupal:
Andrea is a digital artist with the goal to work in the mobile gaming industry.

Hanna L.:
Hanna is the big dill. The title of her biography is "Canteloupe: The Botanist guide to marriage." You can find it in the amazon. But, remember, she doesn't carrot at all if you read it.

Grey Wolfe LaJoie:
Grey gives no interviews, signs no autographs. Your money is sticky. I pretend to play with legos at his feet, but really I watch him. He sits at his typewriter, ticking away. I'm trying to figure out what he does. "Quiet! he says sometimes. Once, he showed me how the typewriter worked. Each letter slaps onto the paper. It can be heard throughout the house. Tick, tick, tick.

Joanna Maldonado:
Joanna is not yet an artist. But she will be. One day.

Ella Mowad:
Ella Mowad is a nineteen year old sophomore who grew up in Florida but won't admit to it. She enjoys reading, writing, and drinking coffee. She lives on the edge of West Asheville with an old, obligatory cat that came with being the kind of pretentious millennial who enjoys reading, writing, and drinking coffee.

Mauro Nieto:
Mauro is a lover of life and nature, as well a hopeless dreamer. An aspiring teacher devoted to the bettering of this planet, Mauro hopes to transfer to UNCA, and to end procrastination.

Eric Overbey:
Eric thinks, therefore he is.

Isabel Perez:
Isabel grew up in Mexico and moved to Asheville 10 years ago. She currently works as a nurse and enjoys writing in her spare time.

Ellen Perry:
Ellen J. Perry is a Literature and Humanities instructor at A-B Tech and UNC-Asheville. Her academic interests include 17th- and 18th-century British life and literature, Restoration drama, and Southern/ Appalachian culture. Ellen's short story "Milk, Bread, Soft Drinks" was awarded First Place in Fiction by the *Bacopa Literary Review* and published in their print journal (October 2015). Additional works of original fiction have appeared in *Deep South Magazine*, *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, and *Gravel* among others. Ellen enjoys traveling to the beach, dancing, reading, and playing with her stylish cat, Ms. Coco Chanel. For more information please visit Ellen's website at www.ellenjperry.com.

Ethan Risinger:
Grey is a young writer from- oh my bad
or: :) :(:) :(:) :(:) :(:I
or: oh no no no no please really, no please, really, oh gosh, really please! Well, Well ok thank you really please. I can't ok please ok really ok really please. I really no no I know I can't really but please. I can't really but please.

Matthew Sauve:
Matthew Sauve is a local amateur stand-up comedian who performs at various events in Asheville, NC. He was born and raised in Mason City, Iowa before joining the U.S. Army and deploying for a combat tour in Afghanistan. He currently attends AB Tech and is seeking a career in occupational therapy, while pursuing his passions in film and comedy on the side. This is Matthew's first publication of any work, and he is extremely humbled and grateful for the opportunity.

Josh Sessoms:
Josh grew up in the small communities outside of Fayetteville, N.C, where his mother was a chemistry teacher and his Father was an electrician. He joined the Army at 18, after almost completing a semester at Appalachian State University. After the Army he became an industrial electrician, but realized his life was unfulfilling after an allergic reaction to medicine while he was working away from home left him comatose for 17 days. He decided to dedicate his life to helping others and is now pursuing a degree in Psychology to work with veterans who suffer from PTSD and the substance abuse issues that usually accompany it.

Micala Smith:
Dear Booma, Whoever spilled this furry concoction better know to have cleaned it up before I really let them in on what's gonna be the consequences. I'm sure I saw that jar brimming with that juice, it must have done overfilled to ruin mama's crushed cream carpet - her most prized of floor coverings. I would definitely frown at this putrid broth had I been unaware of you and your distaste for sweet smelling rugs and their likened kin.

Zach Walters:
Zach Walters is a proud American born and bred in North Carolina. He likes readin' (the blues) an writin' (the blues) an singin' the blues (the real blues). One day he hopes to be in a fancy magazine.

Jordan E. Willett:
Jordan has lived in Asheville all of her life, yet she seeks to obtain a career as an English teacher in a foreign country. She aspires to be thought of as both a great poet and person.
"I am gone quite mad with the knowledge of accepting the overwhelming number of things I can never know, places I can never go, and people I can never be." -The Perspicuous Sylvia Plath

Beverly Williamson:
Beverly Williamson is a full time English Instructor at A-B Tech. She lives in Asheville and is a native North Carolinian.

ENG 125: Creative Writing
Interested in learning the craft of poetry, prose, and dramatic dialogue?
Enroll in A-B Tech's Creative Writing course!

The Rhapsodist will begin accepting submissions for our next issue in September 2016.

Send all queries to rhapsodistjournal@gmail.com

Check out our *Facebook* page for details (The Rhapsodist Literary Arts Journal).

AB Tech Community College

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